

The Political Economy of Examination Paper Leaks, Coaching Syndicates and State Capacity in India

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ABSTRACT

Competitive entrance and recruitment examinations in India ration access to a narrow set of professional seats and public posts, and the returns to holding one are large and lifelong. In 2025, 22,09,318 candidates sat the undergraduate medical entrance test for 1,18,190 seats. Under conditions of that kind the examination becomes an object of capture, and paper leaks recur despite repeated reform, technological upgrading, centralisation and sharply enhanced penalties. This article asks what sustains that recurrence. Its objective is to explain examination leakage as a rent-seeking equilibrium rather than as a sequence of administrative accidents, and to specify how it could be tested. The method is interpretive and documentary, drawing on statutory text, peer-reviewed scholarship, published administrative returns, and investigative filings, with the evidentiary weight of each stated. Existing scholarship is read thematically across corruption and institutional vulnerability, administrative failure and incentive structure, custody and contracting, state capacity and adaptation, and scarcity as a generative mechanism. A framework then specifies structural, institutional and contingent variables, derives the comparative statics of a household participation condition, and states four propositions. Three findings follow. Detection probability rather than penalty severity is the binding constraint, since an enforcement record of two convictions, as Indian express newspaper investigation revealed, across forty-five major cases leaves the expected value of participation positive at every penalty either statute permits. Centralisation under the National Testing Agency reduced the number of discretionary points while enlarging the consequence of failure at each one. And the detected-breach rate is a biased proxy for the latent leakage rate, which a measurement framework developed here separates and bounds. The article concludes that in-sourcing delivery infrastructure, regulating ownership ties between coaching institutions and test centres, expanding the supply of positions, and above all resourcing detection address the equilibrium at different points, and a policy-priority matrix sets out what each costs.

Keywords: examination paper leaks, India, state capacity, rent-seeking, detection probability, education

INTRODUCTION

An examination that allocates a scarce and valuable position does two things at once. It measures something about candidates. It also distributes good. Where the good is worth enough, the second function dominates the first in determining how people behave toward the instrument. The measurement continues. It stops being the point.

Indian competitive examinations sit at the far end of that range, and the published figures for a single recent year are enough to show it. In the 2025 medical entrance cycle, 22,09,318 candidates sat the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test for undergraduate admission and 12,36,531 of them qualified, against a national matrix of 1,18,190 undergraduate medical seats across 780 colleges, government and private together. Engineering entrance has the same shape. A Joint Entrance Examination Main result was declared for 14,75,103 candidates in 2025; 54,378 qualified at the Advanced stage; and the Joint Seat Allocation Authority offered 62,853 seats across 128

institutes, of which 18,160 were in the Indian Institutes of Technology. What selection confers in each case is not a wage premium but a durable position in a labour market where durable positions are scarce.

Recurrent breaches in such a system invite two readings. The administrative reading treats each leak as a failure of security to be met with better security. The reading advanced here treats the pattern as an equilibrium, a stable arrangement in which capture is worth attempting, feasible to execute and rarely punished, and asks what sustains each of those three conditions.

The argument proceeds in four claims of descending confidence. The first is that the examination functions as a rationing device generating substantial rents, which follows from the seat-to-candidate ratios above and from the character of what selection confers. The second is that the legislative response of 2024, extended in 2026, operates on penalty severity while the binding constraint is detection probability, which follows from reading the statutes against the enforcement record. The third is that consolidating administration under a single national agency traded a larger number of small failures for a smaller number of national ones, which Section 5.4 develops as the centralisation paradox. The fourth, and least secure, is that the coaching sector's structural position adjacent to the examination apparatus is what converts opportunity into organisation.

Two of these claims rest on arithmetic and documentary record. Two require evidence that has not been published, and the text marks where the distinction falls.

Three things the article does not claim should be stated at the outset. It does not claim that Indian examinations are unusually corrupt by international standards, and the comparative discussion below gives reasons for doubting that framing. It does not claim that centralisation was a mistake, only that its risk profile differs from what its designers anticipated. And it does not treat candidates who purchase access as the analytically interesting actors, since a system that makes such purchases rational for a large number of households has a design problem that individual culpability does not describe.

The article is organised as follows. The review of literature sets the puzzle against the existing scholarship, read thematically, and states the gap that remains. The theoretical framework specifies the variables and mechanisms formally, derives the comparative statics and states four propositions. The methodology sets out the evidence, its limits, and the empirical strategy through which the propositions could be tested. The anatomy of the supply chain maps the delivery chain, disaggregates state capacity and develops the centralisation paradox. The section on institutional adaptation treats the reform sequence from 2024 to 2026. The remaining sections place the case comparatively, ask who bears the cost, set out implications and reform options with a policy-priority matrix, state the limitations of the framework, and conclude.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Examination leakages persist in India despite repeated institutional reform, technological upgrading, administrative centralisation, sharply enhanced statutory penalties and sustained public scrutiny. That persistence is the puzzle this article addresses. Five bodies of work bear on it. Each captures a real feature of the phenomenon. Each stops short of accounting for recurrence under conditions designed to prevent it. They are taken here as themes rather than as positions held by particular authors, because the same author often supplies evidence to more than one of them.

2.1 Corruption and institutional vulnerability

The first theme concerns whether examination breaches are best understood as corruption, meaning the misuse of public office for private gain, or as vulnerability, meaning a property of the system's design that is exploitable irrespective of the dispositions of the officials staffing it. The corruption reading draws on a substantial cross-national literature. Treisman's study of the causes of corruption and Svensson's survey both indicate that institutional variables outperform cultural ones in explaining variation, and Olken and Pande assemble the microeconomic evidence from developing countries (Treisman, 2000; Svensson, 2005; Olken & Pande, 2012). Mauro's growth analysis and Dzhumashev's later treatment of the governance channel establish the aggregate stakes (Mauro, 1995; Dzhumashev, 2014). Jain's account of political and bureaucratic corruption in India

describes the domestic environment (Jain, 1995), and Braibanti's much earlier reflections identified the self-reinforcing quality of bureaucratic corruption in newly independent states (Braibanti, 1962).

The vulnerability reading shifts attention from actors to architecture. A delivery chain that distributes a question paper to subject experts, translators, moderators, printers, transporters, centre operators and vendors has a large exposed surface, and the number of people holding access is a design parameter rather than a moral fact. The two readings also differ in what they can measure. Newell's discussion of measurement and Lugon-Moulin's account of the mismatch between perception, victimisation and anti-corruption indicators both caution that the quantities the corruption reading relies upon are difficult to observe (Newell, 2018; Lugon-Moulin, 2010), which matters here because the same difficulty reappears in the methodology as the central problem of evidence.

2.2 Administrative failure and the structure of incentives

The second theme concerns whether leakage reflects a failure to execute an existing procedure or a structure of incentives under which the procedure was never likely to hold. The administrative-failure reading treats each breach as a lapse: a strong room inadequately secured, a transport chain inadequately supervised, a vendor inadequately vetted. Its remedy is procedural tightening, and it has produced two decades of measurable improvement in physical security.

The incentive reading treats procedure as endogenous to the payoffs facing those who operate it, and rent-seeking theory supplies the mechanism that Section 3.2 sets out in full. Krueger locates the source of the expenditure in the restricted right itself, and Tullock's welfare arithmetic specifies how much of it is dissipated in the contest (Krueger, 2008 [1974]; Tullock, 2008 [1967]; Tullock, 2001). Bhagwati's category of directly unproductive profit-seeking generalises the argument, and Buchanan's distinction clarifies what separates rent seeking from profit seeking (Bhagwati, 2008; Buchanan, 2008). On this reading a procedure standing between a household and a durable lifetime position is under continuous pressure, and its failure rate is a function of that pressure rather than of the care with which it was drafted.

2.3 Custody, contracting and the governance of delivery

The third theme concerns the appropriate object of intervention. The security position holds that leakage is a problem of custody, and that hardening the chain through which material moves is the direct remedy. The governance position holds that custody is downstream of who holds the contracts, who is accountable for failure, and who can be excluded from future work.

The outsourcing literature is where the disagreement is sharpest. Rich's analysis of shadow state capacity shows that public servants who outsource a function transfer operational capacity to a contractor while retaining formal authority, and that the arrangement obscures who may be held responsible when the function fails (Rich, 2023). Hood's taxonomy of over-outsourcing anticipated the same failure mode, and Barton's work on commercial-in-confidence contracting identifies the accountability gap that opens when contract terms are shielded from disclosure (Hood, 1997; Barton, 2006). Curry's treatment of service contracting, Hodge's assessment of privatisation performance and Robinson's much earlier analysis of government contracting for research describe the general management problem, which is old enough to suggest that the examination case is a particular instance rather than a novelty (Curry, 2019; Hodge, 2018; Robinson, 1971).

2.4 State capacity and institutional adaptation

The fourth theme concerns whether capacity is the binding constraint. The capacity position holds that examination integrity is a function of administrative quality, and that systems fail where the apparatus is weak. Rauch and Evans identify meritocratic recruitment and predictable career ladders as the features most strongly associated with bureaucratic performance in less developed countries, and Besley and Persson treat the administrative apparatus as an accumulated stock built through investment and depleted by neglect (Rauch & Evans, 2000; Besley & Persson, 2009, 2011).

The adaptation position holds that capacity determines the form manipulation takes rather than whether it occurs. The comparative discussion below assembles the evidence that bears on the disagreement, and Section 6.4 notes that the leading methods for identifying manipulation were developed in high-capacity systems because manipulation occurs there too. Chaikin's discussion of controlling corruption among elites and Onyango's review of anti-corruption institutionalisation both indicate that adaptation is difficult to forestall from inside the institution adapting (Chaikin, 2013; Onyango, 2019), and Kenny's analysis of construction procurement describes an analogous dynamic where outsourced delivery and weak verification coincide (Kenny, 2007).

2.5 Scarcity as a mechanism

The fifth theme is the one this article joins most directly, and it concerns whether scarcity is a background condition or a generative mechanism. The background reading treats seat-to-candidate ratios as an unfortunate context within which an integrity problem plays out. The generative reading treats the ratio as the source of the rent that makes capture worth attempting, and therefore as the variable on which everything else depends.

Suen's analysis of rationing establishes the general result that where a valuable good is distributed by a non-price mechanism, resources flow into capturing the mechanism and are dissipated rather than transferred (Suen, 1989). Murphy, Shleifer and Vishny add the aggregate consequence, arguing that when returns to rent-seeking exceed returns to production, able people sort into the former and growth suffers through occupational composition (Murphy et al., 1990). Baumol makes the parallel point about institutional incentives directing entrepreneurial energy (Baumol, 2003).

To locate what the field leaves open, the five themes can be taken in sequence. The corruption theme accounts for why officials in particular positions hold both opportunity and motive, and it does not account for why breaches recur after the specific officials implicated have been removed, or why the pattern reproduces across states with different administrative cultures. The incentive theme accounts for why procedural improvement produces real gains at specific nodes, and it does not account for why those gains fail to aggregate into declining breach counts, or why pressure concentrates where it does. The contracting theme accounts for why physical security has been easier to deliver than accountability reform, and it leaves open whether hardening a node removes a vulnerability or relocates it. The capacity theme accounts for why breach severity and investigative outcome vary with administrative quality, and it does not account for the persistence of manipulation in high-capacity systems, which a pure capacity reading predicts should not occur. The scarcity theme accounts for why pressure on the examination is continuous rather than episodic and insensitive to improvements in the instrument's accuracy, and it does not account for how scarcity is converted into organisation, since a rent creates an incentive without supplying the capability to act on it.

Those five unanswered questions are what the remainder of the article takes up. It treats the disposition of individual officials as largely irrelevant to the equilibrium and locates the durable element in the value of what is being rationed. It specifies the payoff structure formally and identifies which term in its policy has actually operated on. It treats displacement as the expected outcome of node hardening rather than as an anomaly, and specifies the conditions under which hardening produces migration rather than elimination. It separates state capacity into five dimensions instead of treating it as one quantity. And it identifies the intermediary layer through which a rent becomes an organised capability. None of that can be settled by argument alone, which is why the methodology sets out the data and the identification strategy that would test it.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 The political economy of educational scarcity

Indian competitive examinations operate at ratios that few of the systems from which most testing scholarship is drawn approach. That ratio is the starting fact of this article, and it does more analytical work than any account of individual dishonesty.

To analyse what such a ratio does, two readings are available. The administrative reading treats examinations as measurement instruments whose task is to identify merit accurately, with scarcity as an unfortunate background

condition; on that reading a leak is a measurement failure to be corrected by better security. The political-economy reading treats the examination as an allocation device before it is a measurement device, and asks what follows once the thing allocated is worth a great deal. The rationing result cited in the literature review applies with full force here, because the examination is a non-price rationing device of exactly the kind Suen describes (Suen, 1989).

What is being rationed deserves precision. Selection into a government medical seat or a central government post confers more than an income stream. It confers employment security in a labour market where such security is scarce, a claim on social status that persists across a career, and, a consideration the economics literature tends to omit, standing in marriage negotiation. The relevant magnitude is a discounted lifetime position rather than a starting salary, and candidates behave as though they understand this.

Post-colonial institutional history explains part of the ratio. The expansion of secondary and tertiary enrolment ran well ahead of the expansion of professional seats and formal public employment, so each successive cohort faced a tighter bottleneck than the last. Kumar's account of higher-education privatisation in India describes the resulting bind, in which private provision expanded capacity while the seats carrying the strongest labour-market signal remained public, scarce and examination-rationed (Kumar, 2014). Stella and Gnanam reach a compatible conclusion about cross-border provision, which added capacity without displacing the domestic hierarchy of credentials (Stella & Gnanam, 2005). Kingdon's review of the private schooling phenomenon documents the scale of private provision at earlier stages of the system, which feeds the same bottleneck from below (Kingdon, 2017).

Public employment deserves separate mention because its trajectory has been the opposite of enrolment's. Marinakis's overview of public sector employment in developing countries traces the contraction of state hiring across the adjustment period, and Ikpebe's assessment of public service delivery describes the capacity consequences (Marinakis, 1994; Ikpebe, 2024). A system in which the credential-issuing sector expands while the position-issuing sector contracts produces exactly the ratio set out in the introduction. The bottleneck is not an accident of administration. It is the arithmetic of two curves moving in opposite directions. Enrolment rose. Positions did not.

Treating examinations as sorting mechanisms rather than as measurement instruments carries an implication the administrative literature resists. A sorting mechanism under extreme scarcity generates pressure regardless of how well it measures, and improving the instrument's accuracy leaves that pressure intact.

3.2 Rent-seeking in high-stakes gatekeeping

Krueger's formulation of the rent-seeking society identifies the mechanism at work. Where the state creates a restricted right, the value of that right attracts expenditure aimed at obtaining it, and the expenditure is socially wasteful because it produces no output (Krueger, 2008 [1974]). Tullock's earlier statement of the welfare arithmetic makes the same point about the resources consumed in the contest itself (Tullock, 2008 [1967]), and his later formalisation of efficient rent seeking specifies how contest structure determines how much is dissipated (Tullock, 2001). Applied to examinations, the restricted right is the seat, and the expenditure is everything spent on obtaining it outside the intended channel.

The welfare consequence has a dimension beyond dissipated resources. On the account of Murphy, Shleifer and Vishny, aggregate growth suffers through the composition of occupational choice rather than through the direct waste (Murphy et al., 1990), and Baumol's treatment of productive, unproductive and destructive entrepreneurship makes the parallel institutional point (Baumol, 2003). A system that rewards several years of full-time examination preparation, for a large cohort most of whom will not be selected, is allocating talent in the manner these accounts describe.

The candidate's decision can be written compactly. Let P_s denote the probability that syndicate participation secures selection, R the discounted lifetime rent attaching to the seat, P_d the probability of detection, and C the penalty on detection. Participation is attractive where

$$E(U) = P_s \cdot R - (1 - P_s) \cdot P_d \cdot C$$

The structure of this equation carries the argument of the article. Three of its four terms have been the object of policy attention: the state has attempted to reduce P_s through security measures and to raise C through legislation. The fourth term is where the equilibrium actually lives. Where P_d approaches zero the entire subtrahend approaches zero irrespective of how large C becomes, and the equation reduces to P_s multiplied by R , a quantity that is positive whenever the syndicate delivers anything at all. Multiplying the penalty by ten changes little when the probability of ever applying it is close to nil.

That is an arithmetic claim rather than an empirical one, and it invites the empirical question of what P_d actually is. Section 6.3 takes it up. What the formulation establishes here is narrower: any reform operating on C alone is working on the term least able to move the outcome.

A qualification belongs at this point. The expression treats the candidate as the decision-maker, and in a substantial share of documented cases the transacting party is a parent or an extended family pooling resources. Family-level decision-making changes the budget constraint and probably the risk tolerance, and the literature has not established in which direction. The formulation should be read as describing a household's calculation where the household is the paying unit.

3.3 Comparative statics of the participation condition

To establish how much each term can move the outcome, the equation is differentiated with respect to each of its four arguments.

First-order effects, with respect to the selection probability, the rent, the detection probability and the penalty in turn:

$$\frac{\partial E(U)}{\partial P_s} = R + P_d \cdot C > 0$$

$$\frac{\partial E(U)}{\partial R} = P_s > 0$$

$$\frac{\partial E(U)}{\partial P_d} = -(1 - P_s) \cdot C < 0$$

$$\frac{\partial E(U)}{\partial C} = -(1 - P_s) \cdot P_d \leq 0$$

Raising the probability that participation secures selection raises utility, by adding the rent and removing the expected penalty burden. Raising the value of the seat raises utility in proportion to that probability. Raising the probability of detection lowers utility in proportion to the penalty, weighted by the probability of not being selected. The fourth derivative carries the argument: the marginal deterrent value of the penalty is proportional to P_d , so as detection approaches zero the deterrent effect of severity collapses with it.

Second-order effects. The function is multi-linear in each argument, so every pure second-order derivative vanishes:

$$\frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial P_s^2} = 0, \quad \frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial R^2} = 0, \quad \frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial P_d^2} = 0, \quad \frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial C^2} = 0$$

The mixed derivatives carry the interactions, in penalty and detection, selection and penalty, selection and detection, and selection and rent respectively, with the remaining pairs uncoupled:

$$\frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial C \partial P_d} = \frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial P_d \partial C} = -(1 - P_s) < 0$$

$$\frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial P_s \partial C} = \frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial C \partial P_s} = P_d \geq 0$$

$$\frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial P_s \partial P_d} = \frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial P_d \partial P_s} = C \geq 0$$

$$\frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial P_s \partial R} = \frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial R \partial P_s} = 1$$

$$\frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial R \partial P_d} = 0, \quad \frac{\partial^2 E(U)}{\partial R \partial C} = 0$$

The cross-partial in penalty and detection is the term of policy interest. It states that the effectiveness of raising the penalty depends directly on the detection probability, so certainty and severity are complements rather than substitutes. Collecting the second-order terms gives the Hessian:

$$\mathbf{H} = \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 1 & C & P_d \\ 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ C & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ P_d & 0 & -(1 - P_s) & 0 \end{bmatrix} - (1 - P_s) \begin{bmatrix} P_d \\ 0 \\ 0 \\ 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

The diagonal is zero and the off-diagonal entries are not. The objective is therefore indefinite in these arguments, and the return to moving any one instrument depends on the level at which another is held. Figure 1 sets out the same result graphically.

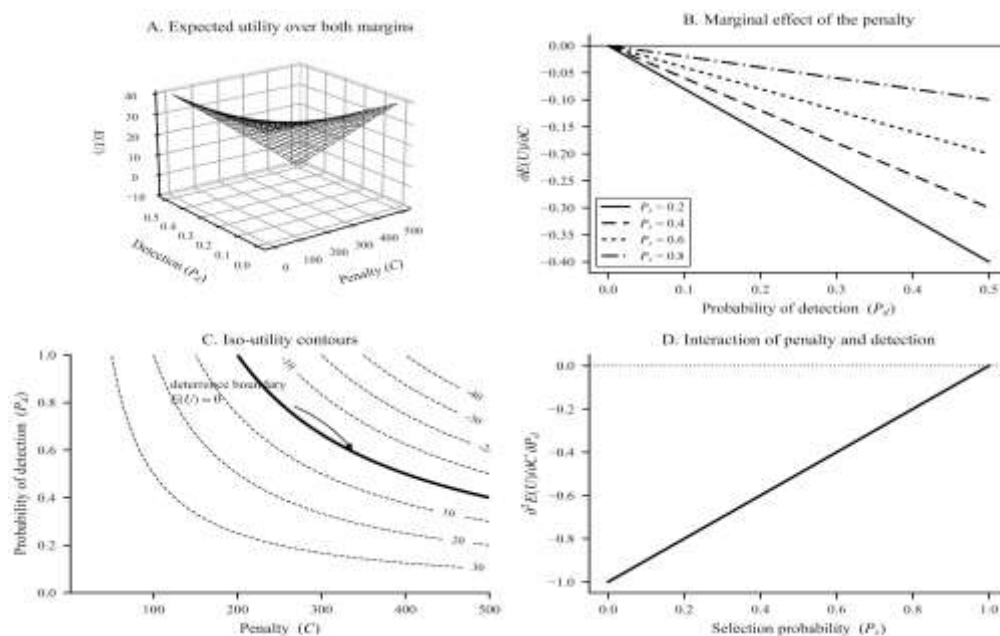


Figure 1: Comparative statics of the participation condition

Note: All four panels are exact properties of the equation in Section 3.2, drawn with P_s set at 0.8 and R at 50 in the units used throughout. They are not estimates from data. Panel A gives expected utility over the penalty and detection margins jointly. Panel B gives the marginal effect of the penalty at four levels of the selection probability, which collapses toward zero as detection falls. Panel C gives iso-utility contours and the deterrence boundary at which expected utility reaches zero. Panel D gives the interaction of penalty and detection, which is the term policy has left unaddressed.

3.4 What the credential actually signals

The rent R has a source, and identifying it matters because the most attractive reform, expanding supply, depends on what that source is.

If the seat confers skills that raise productivity, expanding the number of seats raises aggregate output and reduces the rent by satisfying demand. If the seat functions principally as a signal, the picture changes. Spence's job market signalling model establishes the conditions under which education transmits information about pre-existing attributes rather than creating new ones (Spence, 1973). Arrow's account of higher education as a filter develops the institutional version, in which the university selects and certifies rather than transforming (Arrow, 1973). Layard and Psacharopoulos set out the empirical difficulty of separating the two mechanisms from wage data (Layard & Psacharopoulos, 1974), and Weiss's later review concludes that the evidence supports a mixture rather than either pure account (Weiss, 1995).

The distinction has a sharp implication for the case at hand, because a signal's value depends on its scarcity. Expanding the supply of a credential without expanding the supply of positions relocates the bottleneck rather than removing it, since candidates then compete on a further margin: institutional prestige, rank within the cohort, a subsequent examination. Evidence on sheepskin effects, in which the return attaches to completion rather than to years of study, is consistent with a substantial certification component (Herault & Zakirova, 2011), and Davis's earlier treatment of credentialism connects the pattern to the division of labour rather than to skill formation (Davis, 1981). This is why Section 9.2 treats supply expansion as necessary and insufficient.

The argument should not be pushed too far. Medical and engineering training plainly transmit skills, and the positions at issue require them. The claim here is comparative. At the margin where syndicate transactions occur, the value of selection into one institution over another is more plausibly certification than skill, because the candidates concerned are close in measured attainment. A reform premised on the pure human-capital reading would predict that expansion dissolves the problem; the credentialist literature predicts that it displaces the problem. The Indian record since the expansion of private engineering capacity is more consistent with the second, though the comparison has confounds this article cannot control.

3.5 The coaching sector: structural position and incentive

Commercial coaching in India has grown into an industry whose scale bears little relation to the pedagogical function it nominally performs. Bray and Zhang situate the Indian case within a global expansion of private supplementary tutoring that follows high-stakes examination systems wherever they appear (Bray & Zhang, 2022), and Bray and Hajar document the same dynamic in the Middle East (Bray & Hajar, 2022). Dang and Rogers frame the analytical question the sector poses, which is whether such tutoring deepens human capital, widens inequality, or consumes resources without producing either (Dang & Rogers, 2008). Zhang and Xie show how strongly family background mediates access to the private channel in Chinese data (Zhang & Xie, 2026). Indian evidence bears on all three possibilities without settling among them.

Biswal's account anticipates the present argument most directly. Writing on developing-country systems, he models private tutoring and public corruption as complements rather than substitutes: teachers with weak public incentives supply effort through the private channel, and the private channel's returns depend on the public channel remaining inadequate (Biswal, 1999). The Indian coaching sector is not a straightforward instance of that model, since the largest hubs are not staffed by the same personnel who administer examinations. The structural insight transfers regardless. A private sector whose revenues depend on the difficulty of a public gate acquires an interest in that gate's properties.

Recent Indian public-health scholarship has begun treating the sector as a determinant in its own right. Yumnam characterises the coaching industry as a commercial determinant of mental health, drawing on the concentration of aspirants in hub cities and the documented psychological toll of sustained preparation (Yumnam, 2025). A boundary problem follows from the sector's own positioning. Coaching providers present themselves as diagnostic and preparatory, which places them close to the assessment apparatus while leaving them outside the regulatory perimeter that governs the bodies conducting the assessment. No Indian statute treats a coaching institute as a party to the examination it prepares candidates for.

Proximity is the operative concept. A coaching institute holds three things a syndicate requires: a roster of paying candidates sorted by willingness to pay, detailed intelligence about examination format and likely content, and physical premises in the same towns as test centres. None of that is illicit. The combination places the sector

adjacent to every node described in Section 5.1, and adjacency is a condition of opportunity rather than evidence of conduct. The first chargesheet in the 2026 NEET-UG matter is reported to allege a network of persons running coaching institutes who sought to secure results for enrolled students and thereby attract further business, which is an allegation before a court rather than a finding. The sector is structurally positioned, commercially incentivised and potentially advantaged by breach. None of that establishes participation, and this article does not assert it. Section 4.6 sets out what evidence would settle the question.

3.6 The aspirant economy and its human cost

A framework built on rents and detection probabilities can describe the arrangement without registering what it costs the people inside it, and that omission would distort the reform discussion in Section 9.2.

Concentrated preparation has produced a distinct settlement pattern, in which aspirants relocate for extended periods to hub cities organised around coaching provision. The health consequences have become a subject of clinical literature rather than commentary. Pal, Bhesera and Bika document mental health conditions and suicide among adolescent coaching aspirants in Kota, and Kar and Arafat frame the pattern as a cost of career pursuit rather than as individual pathology (Pal et al., 2025; Kar & Arafat, 2023). Yumnam's characterisation of the sector draws on the same evidence base (Yumnam, 2025).

Three analytical points follow, and the third bears directly on the article's argument. The human cost is a function of the same scarcity that generates the rent, so that where selection ratios are extreme and the consequence of failure is a durable loss of position, sustained psychological pressure on candidates is a direct equation of the system's structure rather than a side effect of it. The cost falls disproportionately on the compliant, since candidates who purchase leaked material bear less of this burden than those who prepare for years without it, which is a distributional fact the discussion of distribution develops. And the cost bounds what reform can claim, because an intervention that raises detection probability without reducing scarcity leaves the aspirant economy intact, including its health consequences. That is a reason to treat supply expansion as more than an economic instrument, and a reason to be sceptical of reform packages evaluated solely by breach counts.

3.7 The formal framework

The account developed above can be stated as a set of relations among variables of three kinds.

Structural variables change slowly and are not set by examination policy. Examination scarcity, measured as the seat-to-candidate ratio, and competition intensity, measured as the number of cycles a median candidate attempts, belong here. So does the discounted lifetime rent attaching to a position, which derives from labour-market structure rather than from any decision an examining agency takes. These variables set the pressure on the system and are the reason that pressure is continuous.

Institutional variables are set by policy and are the object of reform. Technological security architecture, bureaucratic monitoring capacity, investigative and enforcement capacity, legal deterrence, and the degree of administrative centralisation belong here. These variables determine whether pressure converts into breach, and at which node.

Contingent variables vary across cycles and locations and account for the observed clustering. The presence of organised intermediaries with local knowledge, coaching-market density in a given town, the identity of the contracted service provider, and the political salience of a particular examination belong here.

The dependent outcome is the leakage rate, which is not directly observed. Its observable proxy is the detected-breach rate, and Sections 4.2 and 4.3 treat that proxy as a non-random sample of the quantity of interest. Institutional trust is a second dependent outcome, and it matters because it feeds back: falling trust raises the political salience of breaches, which raises the probability of reform, which alters the institutional variables and prompts adaptation among the contingent ones.

The intervening mechanisms are three. Rent creation converts scarcity into willingness to pay. Intermediation converts willingness to pay into organised capability. Displacement converts a hardened node into pressure on a softer one. The third mechanism is what makes the loop rather than the chain the appropriate representation, and it is why Figure 2 closes back on itself.

Table 1: Variables, mechanisms and expected outcomes in the political economy of examination leakage

Variable	Type	Mechanism	Expected outcome
Scarcity of positions	Structural	Rent creation	Higher incentive to attempt capture
Competition intensity	Structural	Demand pressure	Higher willingness to pay
Discounted lifetime rent	Structural	Valuation of the seat	Larger transacted sums
Security architecture	Institutional	Node hardening	Displacement toward softer nodes
Monitoring capacity	Institutional	Supervision of contracted delivery	Reduced vulnerability at delivery
Enforcement capacity	Institutional	Detection and sanction	Lower participation via certainty
Legal deterrence	Institutional	Penalty severity	Limited effect where detection is low
Centralisation	Institutional	Fewer principals, larger cohort	Fewer but more severe breaches
Organised intermediaries	Contingent	Intermediation	Conversion of incentive into capability
Coaching-market density	Contingent	Proximity and opportunity	Geographic clustering of cases
Institutional trust	Outcome	Feedback to political salience	Reform, then adaptation

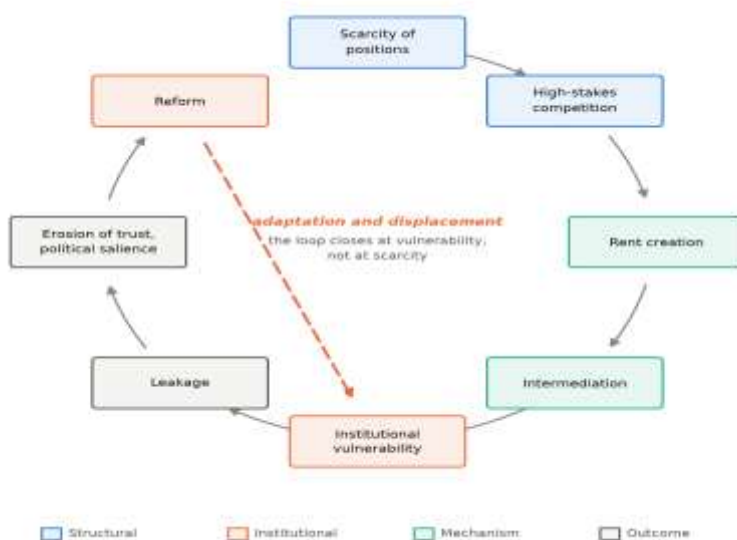


Figure 2: The political economy of examination leakage: a reproducing loop

(Note: The loop closes at the vulnerability node rather than at scarcity, because reform in the observed record has operated on institutional variables while leaving the structural variables that generate the rent unchanged.

The framework predicts that interventions entering the loop below the rent-creation node suppress the observable equilibrium without dissolving it.)

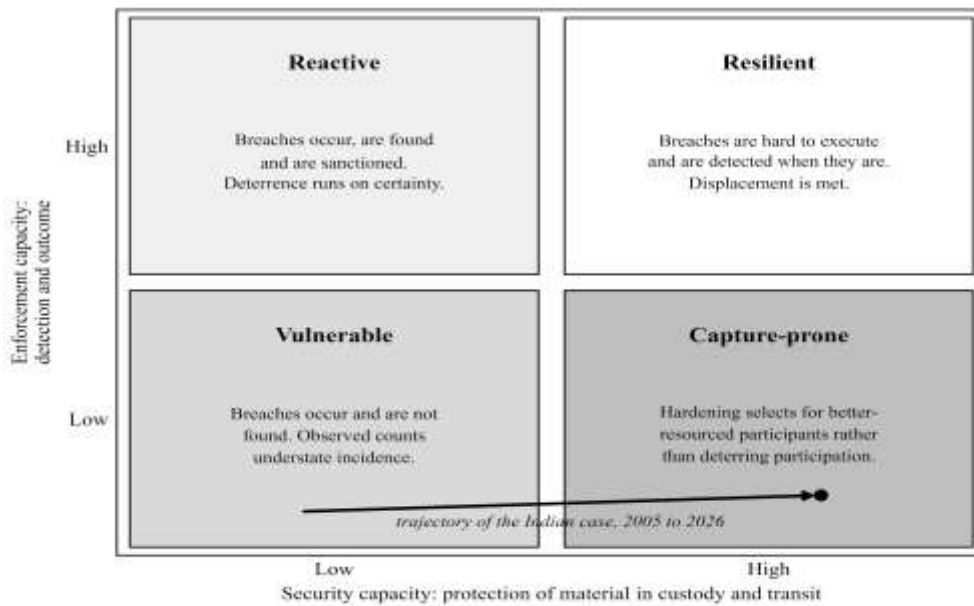


Figure 3: The examination integrity matrix: security capacity against enforcement capacity

The matrix crosses two institutional variables that reform programmes tend to treat as one. Security capacity, on the horizontal axis, is the ability to protect material in custody and transit. Enforcement capacity, on the vertical axis, is the ability to detect a breach that has occurred and to carry it to an outcome. Where both are high the system is resilient, and displacement pressure is met at whichever node it moves to. Where security is low and enforcement high the system is reactive: breaches occur but are found and punished, the deterrent operates through certainty, and the system learns from its own detection record. Where both are low the system is vulnerable, and the observed breach count understates incidence by an unknown factor. The fourth quadrant is the one that matters for this case. Where security is high and enforcement low, physical hardening raises the cost of a breach at the protected node, which selects for better-resourced and better-connected participants rather than deterring participation, while the absence of enforcement means those participants face little expected cost. The argument of the two sections that follow is that the Indian case has been moving along the horizontal axis while remaining low on the vertical one, which locates it in that quadrant.

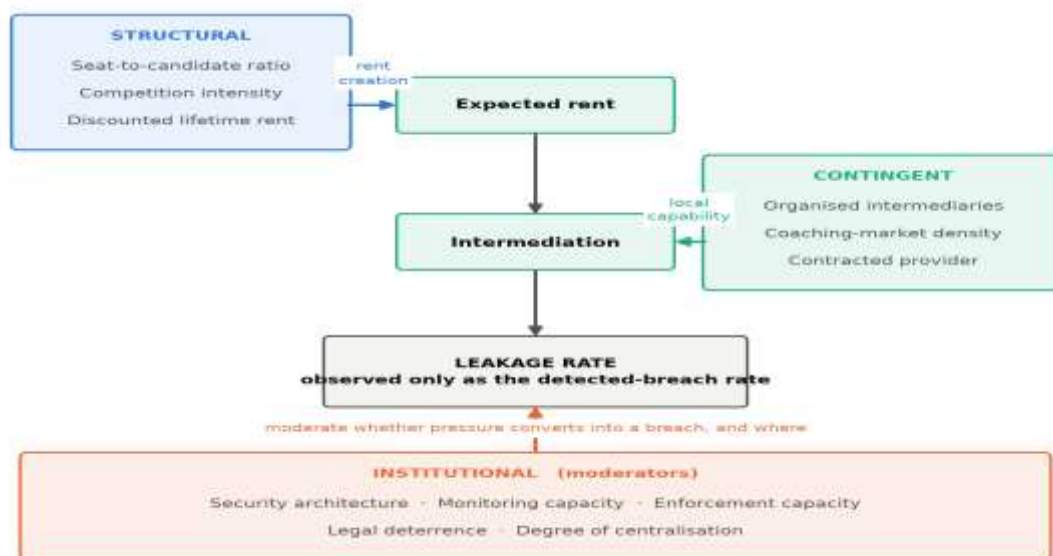


Figure 4: Variables by type, the mechanisms connecting them, and the moderating role of the institutional layer

3.8 Propositions

To test the framework empirically, four propositions can be stated, each carrying an observable implication that would count against it.

The first concerns scarcity. Where the seat-to-candidate ratio falls, expected rents rise and with them the incentive to attempt manipulation, so breach attempts should concentrate in the examinations with the most adverse ratios once candidate volume is held constant. The second concerns centralisation. Consolidating administration reduces the number of points at which discretion can be exercised and raises the consequence of failure at each remaining point, so breaches after centralisation should be fewer in number and larger in affected cohort than those before it, measured on a comparable basis. The third concerns the penalty margin. Where detection probability is low, increases in statutory penalty produce little change in participation, and liability regimes attaching to service providers alter behaviour only to the extent that firms expect them to be applied. Participation indicators should therefore not fall discontinuously at the commencement of the 2024 Act or of its 2026 amendment, and vendor investment in internal controls should respond to the first application of the exclusion provision rather than to its enactment. The fourth concerns displacement. Interventions that harden a node, or that raise detection without reducing the rent, relocate activity rather than ending it. Two observable shifts follow. The modal breach node should move over time from printing and transport toward setting, moderation and vendor-operated delivery, and a sustained rise in detection should be followed by migration toward examinations or jurisdictions with weaker monitoring.

Each proposition is stated in a form that a panel of examination cycles could bear on. The methodology sets out how such a panel would be assembled from published sources, what identification strategy the legislative and administrative changes permit, and what would have to be measured before any of the four could be regarded as tested.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Approach and evidentiary layers

This article advances a causal argument about a national system observed over roughly two decades, so the analysis presented here is interpretive and documentary rather than statistical. Its claims are accordingly bounded: it identifies a mechanism consistent with the observed pattern and specifies what would disconfirm it. Sections 4.3 to 4.6 set out the empirical programme that would carry the argument past that boundary.

Four layers of evidence are used and they differ substantially in strength. Statutory text carries the analysis of the 2024 Act and the 2026 amendment in Sections 6.1 and 6.2, and is the firmest evidence in the article, since the provisions are public and their reading is not seriously contested. Peer-reviewed scholarship carries the theoretical framework, the comparative material in the comparative discussion and the clinical evidence in Section 3.6. Published administrative returns, including answers given in Parliament and in state legislatures, carry the enforcement record. Investigative filings and press reporting carry the operational account of the supply chain and the pricing evidence in Section 5.2; these are the weakest layer and they support some of the article's most concrete claims.

Quantitative series on the outcome of interest are largely absent. No breach-frequency series compiled on a comparable basis before and after the National Testing Agency assumed its current role has been published, and none was located for this article, which prevents the centralisation claim from being tested directly. Nor has any statistical analysis of Indian examination response data been published. An application under the Right to Information Act was filed for anonymised UGC NET response data for the present study, and the agency declined to supply it. The second absence is itself a finding, developed in Section 6.4.

4.2 The selection problem in the evidence

One methodological difficulty deserves separate statement because it conditions everything that follows. Public knowledge of examination breaches comes overwhelmingly from cases that were detected, and detection is not

random. Breaches that leave physical traces are more likely to be found than breaches that do not. Breaches that produce visible anomalies at scale are more likely to generate cancellation and therefore reporting. Breaches in examinations with national salience attract investigative resources that breaches in state-level examinations do not.

The consequence is that the observed pattern is a pattern in the detected subset, and Section 6.3 argues that this subset is small. Every descriptive claim about the supply chain should be read with that qualification attached. The response adopted here is to rely on the detected cases for the structure of the arrangement, meaning which nodes were used and what the sequence was, while declining to draw inferences about frequency or trend from case counts.

4.3 Separating the leakage rate from the detected-breach rate

To make the selection problem tractable, and not simply to concede it, the two quantities that public debate runs together have to be defined apart. Let L denote the leakage rate, the share of examination cycles in which confidential material passed outside the intended channel. Let D denote the detected-breach rate, the share of cycles in which such passage was found, recorded and reported. The two are connected by a detection propensity, so that D equals the product of that propensity and L . The propensity is not a constant. It rises with the physical traceability of the method used, with the political salience of the examination, and with the investigative resource actually committed, and it falls where a breach occurs upstream of any physical handling. Every claim about trend in the Indian debate is a claim about D , and is therefore a claim about the product of two moving quantities.

Figure 5 sets out the structure and the identification route. Three lists of breach events can be constructed on criteria that are selected differently from one another. The first holds cases with recovered physical material or testimony. The second holds cases flagged by anomalies in response data, of the kind Jacob and Levitt exploited for teacher cheating in Chicago (Jacob & Levitt, 2003). The third holds cases appearing in administrative and audit records, such as cancellation notices, vendor debarments and returns furnished under the Right to Information Act. Where the same underlying event appears on more than one list, the pattern of overlap identifies the shortfall between what was recorded and what occurred, in the way that multiple-systems estimation is used for populations that no single list enumerates. The estimate will be imprecise and its assumptions will require testing, and it would still convert an unbounded selection problem into a bounded one.

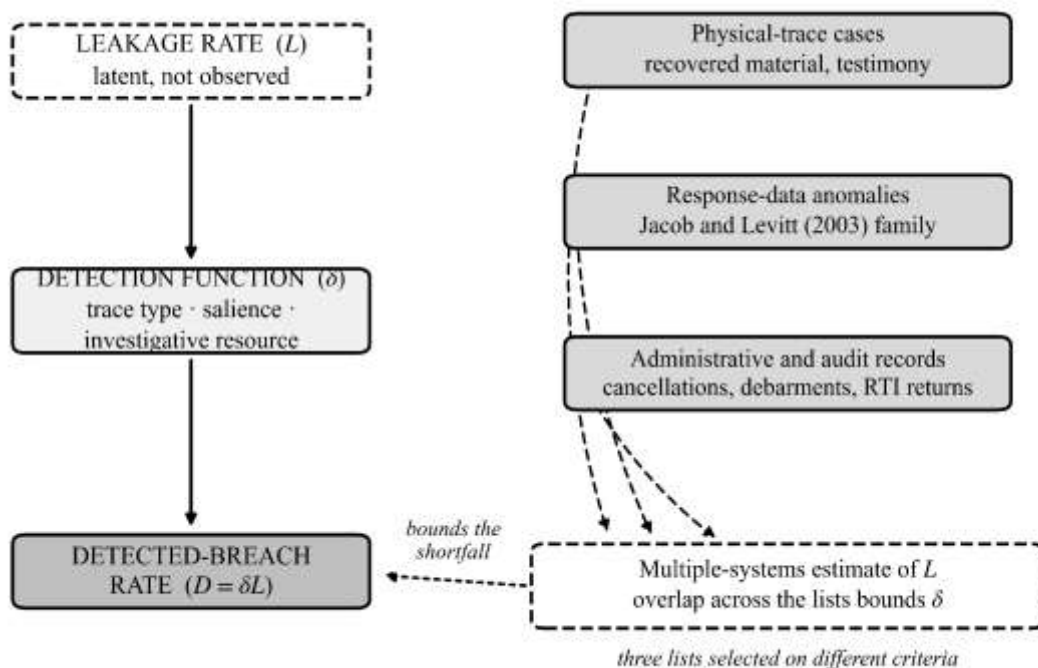


Figure 5: Separating the latent leakage rate from the observed detected-breach rate

Note: The detected-breach rate is the product of the leakage rate and a detection propensity that varies across methods, examinations and years. Because the three lists on the right are selected on different criteria, their overlap bounds that propensity and therefore bounds the shortfall in the recorded rate.

Table 2: A measurement framework for examination leakage

Quantity	Definition	How it can be observed	Principal bias
Leakage rate (L)	Share of cycles in which material passed outside the intended channel	Not observed directly; estimated from overlap across independently selected lists	Understated by every available source
Detected-breach rate (D)	Share of cycles in which passage was found, recorded and reported	Agency notices, first information reports, chargesheets, legislative answers	Tracks investigative capability and salience as much as incidence
Detection propensity	Ratio of D to L for a given method, examination and year	Bounded by multiple-systems estimation; validated against response-data flags	Rises with physical traceability, falls for upstream breaches
Cancellation rate	Share of cycles cancelled or re-conducted	Agency notices and court orders	Responds to political salience, not only to evidence
Conviction rate	Share of registered cases ending in conviction	Court records and legislative answers	Confounds investigation, prosecution, judicial delay and actual culpability

Two consequences follow for the rest of the analysis. Any test of the centralisation proposition must use an outcome that is not mechanically a function of the treatment, because centralisation altered both the number of examinations and the intensity with which they were watched. Severity measures, such as the size of the cohort affected and the node at which the breach occurred, are better behaved in this respect than counts. And any test of the penalty proposition must accept that a reform which raises detection will raise D even if it lowers L, so that the naive reading of a rising series is the opposite of the correct one.

4.4 A state and examination level panel

To move the propositions of Section 3.8 from plausibility to evidence, the analysis needs a panel whose unit of observation is the examination cycle in a state or, for centrally conducted examinations, in a zone. India publishes enough to build one. Table 3 sets out the variable blocks and the sources in which each is already available.

Table 3: Design of a state and examination level panel

Variable block	Variables	Published source
Examination architecture	Conducting body; mode of delivery; number of shifts and paper sets; number of centres	Agency information bulletins and public notices
Scale and scarcity	Registrations; candidates appearing; qualifying candidates; seats or posts advertised	Agency result notifications; National Medical Commission seat matrix; Joint Seat Allocation Authority seat matrix; commission annual reports
Outsourcing arrangement	Identity of contracted provider; contract scope and value; debarment record	Tender documents on the Central Public Procurement Portal and agency websites; answers to parliamentary questions
Detected breaches	Incident count; node at which the breach occurred; examination affected; cancellation or re-examination	First information reports and chargesheets; agency notices; state legislative answers
Enforcement outcomes	Arrests; chargesheets filed; convictions; acquittals; pendency; officials dismissed	State legislative answers; court records; National Crime Records Bureau reporting

Coaching-market density	Registered institutes and branches in the town of each centre; corporate filings	Ministry of Corporate Affairs and Registrar of Companies filings; goods and services tax registrations; municipal trade registers
Legal regime	Commencement of the 2024 Act and the 2026 amendment; state ordinances and their dates	India Code; PRS Legislative Research bill tracks; state gazettes

An answer given in the Rajasthan legislative assembly in January 2024 shows what a single such source yields. Across recruitment examination paper-leak cases registered in the state from January 2014, 615 persons had been arrested in 33 cases; chargesheets had been filed in 32 of them with investigation continuing in one; 49 of the accused were government servants, mostly teachers, of whom 11 had been dismissed; and the annual distribution ran to five cases in 2021, ten in 2022 and five in 2023. That single reply supplies a detected-breach count, a node indicator, an enforcement outcome and an official-involvement measure for one state over one decade. Replicated across states and examining bodies, answers of this kind are the backbone of the panel described above. They also illustrate the measurement problem of Section 4.3 in miniature, since the reported fall after 2022 is equally consistent with fewer breaches and with less detection.

4.5 Identification: difference-in-differences and event-study designs

To estimate whether the changes of the past two decades moved the equilibrium, the panel described above supports three designs, each keyed to a different treatment.

The transfer of an examination to the National Testing Agency is the first, and it is the most useful because it did not happen everywhere at once. Examinations moved to the agency in different years, so the treatment is staggered, and a difference-in-differences estimator with examination and cycle fixed effects compares the change in outcomes for examinations that had already moved against those that had not yet moved. The corresponding event study, tracing outcomes over a window of cycles either side of the transfer, provides the test that matters most: if the pre-transfer coefficients trend, the design is not identifying the effect of centralisation but the reason particular examinations were centralised first.

The commencement of the 2024 Act is the second. Its timing is common to all examinations within its scope, which rules out a staggered design, and its scope is not universal, which supplies the comparison instead. Examinations conducted by bodies outside the central Act's coverage at commencement, and governed instead by state instruments adopted on different dates, form a comparison group against centrally conducted examinations. The same logic applies to the 2026 amendment, whose special task force and fast-track court provisions will be constituted state by state, generating a second staggered treatment whose rollout can be dated from official notifications.

Three challenges deserve more attention . Detection intensity is itself a function of treatment, so an estimated rise in recorded breaches after a reform may record better looking rather than more leaking, which is why the outcome should be built from severity and node composition as well as from counts, and why the bounds of Section 4.3 belong in the specification rather than in a footnote. Political salience moves with the treatment, since large breaches prompt both legislation and investigation, so specifications should absorb salience directly, for instance through counts of parliamentary questions or of cancellation orders in the preceding cycle. And the displacement mechanism violates the assumption that untreated units are unaffected, because pressure relocated from a treated examination lands on an untreated one. That violation is not a nuisance to be dismissed. It is the fourth proposition, and a specification that estimates spillovers onto neighbouring jurisdictions and unreformed examinations tests the framework where a specification that assumes them away does not.

What such a design can deliver should be stated plainly. With the outcome measured as it must be, the estimates would be preliminary rather than decisive, and their value lies in the direction and the pre-trends as much as in the point estimates. That is still a considerable advance on a literature which, as Section 4.1 notes, has no comparable series at all.

4.5 Testing the coaching-sector proposition independently

The weakest of the four propositions is the one about the coaching sector, and it is weak for a specific reason: it currently rests on proximity, and proximity between a coaching hub and a test centre is consistent both with participation and with the ordinary commercial logic of locating a business near its customers. Proximity cannot be the test. Three kinds of data can be, and none of them requires access to investigative files.

Ownership is the first. Corporate filings identify the directors and shareholders of companies operating coaching institutes and of companies holding centre-operation or invigilation contracts. A common directorship, a shared registered address, or a shareholding link between the two sets is an observable fact rather than an inference, and its frequency can be compared against a matched set of towns with centres but without documented breaches.

Contracting is the second. Tender documents and award notices record which firms hold which parts of the delivery chain, on what terms and for how long, and whether the premises used as examination centres are owned or leased by entities related to coaching providers. Where contract terms are withheld, the withholding is itself the variable Barton's work on commercial-in-confidence contracting predicts (Barton, 2006).

Relational structure is the third. The accused named across chargesheets, the solvers identified in them, and the institutions at which those solvers were enrolled form a two-mode network of persons and organisations that can be assembled entirely from public filings. If the network reading advanced in Section 5.3 is right, that structure should show recurring brokers rather than a stable hierarchy, and the recurrence should be concentrated in particular towns rather than particular firms. If the ownership and contracting data show no more overlap in breach-affected towns than in matched controls, and the relational data show no recurring brokerage, the proposition should be abandoned rather than restated. Stating that condition in advance is what distinguishes the claim from an insinuation.

5. ANATOMY OF SUPPLY CHAIN

5.1 Mapping the vulnerability lifecycle

Examination material passes through five stages between composition and result, and the security literature has concentrated on the stage that is easiest to photograph.

Paper setting, translation and moderation is the first. Question papers are composed by subject experts, translated into multiple languages, and moderated by panels. Each of these functions distributes the content to people whose selection is not public and whose accountability is internal to the commissioning agency. The first chargesheet in the 2026 NEET-UG matter, filed before the Special CBI Court at Rouse Avenue in Delhi on 29 July 2026 against 13 accused, is reported to allege this node specifically, naming three subject experts appointed by the agency itself to the chemistry, physics and botany panels. The allegations have not been tried.

Printing and strong-room storage is the second, and the one that receives most attention. Papers are printed under contract, transported to district-level strong rooms, and held until examination morning. Physical security here has improved measurably over two decades. Improvement at a single node reduces aggregate risk only where that node was binding, and the recurrence of alleged breaches upstream of it suggests that it was not.

Transport and regional distribution is the third. Material moves from strong rooms to individual centres on the examination day itself, through a chain involving district administration, police escort and centre superintendents.

Outsourced technology provision and centre operation is the fourth, and is where this article locates the largest change. Test delivery, candidate authentication, seat allocation and in many cases the physical premises are contracted to private vendors. The contracting agency retains legal responsibility while the operational surface passes to firms it does not employ.

Response handling, evaluation and result processing is the fifth, where answer sheets or digital responses are collected, scored and converted into ranks.

The shadow-state-capacity mechanism set out in the literature review is why the fourth node carries the weight given to it here. The Indian examination case exhibits all three of the features that literature identifies: functions transferred, authority retained, contract terms unpublished (Rich, 2023; Hood, 1997; Barton, 2006).

5.2 Cross-state dynamics and solver networks

Documented cases cluster geographically in ways that repay attention. Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra recur across investigations spanning different examinations and different years, which suggests something more durable than opportunistic local criminality.

Operational accounts drawn from investigative filings describe a recognisable sequence. Access to material is obtained at an upstream node. The material is photographed or transcribed and transmitted through encrypted messaging. A group of high-performing students, in the NEET-UG matter reported to include candidates and recent entrants at premier medical institutions, solves the paper against the clock. Answer keys reach paying candidates shortly before entry.

Pricing evidence requires care, and two separate matters are often merged in commentary. In the 2024 NEET-UG cycle, four candidates arrested by the Economic Offences Unit of the Bihar police told investigators that they had each paid approximately Rs 32 lakh, with intermediaries reported to have quoted Rs 30 to 32 lakh, and the prime accused was reported to have admitted charging up to Rs 40 lakh. In the 2026 matter the first CBI chargesheet alleges that a member of the chemistry expert panel earned at least Rs 21 lakh from the leak, with onward sale to candidates reported in the range of Rs 50,000 to Rs 15 lakh for a paper or an individual section. A range extending to Rs 50 lakh circulates in secondary commentary; no source located for this article supports that ceiling, and it is not used here. The verified figures are enough to establish the analytical point, which concerns magnitude relative to household income rather than any precise upper bound. Transacted sums correspond to multiple years of median household earnings, which is consistent with candidates and families valuing R at something far larger than a salary differential.

The solver network is the element least well explained by rent-seeking theory alone. Solvers are, by construction, people who already succeeded at the examination, so their participation cannot be explained by the rent they are seeking to capture. Two explanations are available and the available evidence does not separate them: direct payment sufficient to matter to a student, or network obligation to the coaching institutions and intermediaries through which they themselves passed. The second would suggest that the coaching relationship persists after selection in a form the sector's own accounts do not describe. That is a hypothesis for the relational analysis proposed in Section 4.6 rather than a finding.

5.3 What kind of organisation is this?

Describing the arrangement as a syndicate implies a structure, and the criminal-networks literature indicates the implication should be handled with care. Bright and Whelan's distinction between organised crime, criminal organisations and criminal networks separates three things routinely conflated: a category of activity, a durable hierarchical entity, and a set of relations among loosely coupled actors (Bright & Whelan, 2020). The documented Indian cases fit the third description considerably better than the second. Investigative accounts describe intermediaries assembling capability for a particular examination cycle, comprising an upstream contact, a transmission channel, a solver group and a set of paying candidates, rather than a standing organisation with fixed membership.

Three implications follow, and they matter for enforcement design. A network assembled per cycle is resilient to the removal of individual participants in a way a hierarchy is not, since the structure is a pattern of relations rather than a roster, so enforcement calibrated to dismantling organisations will report successes that do not reduce recurrence. The recurrence of particular states across cases is then better explained by the persistence of those relations than by the persistence of any organisation, since what recurs is a local capability: people who know whom to approach. And the organised-crime provision of the 2024 Act, discussed in Section 6.1, presupposes the structure it is least likely to encounter, since a provision addressed to organised entities is a blunt instrument against relations reassembled for each cycle.

The reading should be held loosely. Investigative filings describe what investigators found, and investigators working under an organised-crime statute have reason to characterise what they find in those terms. The network reading and the organisation reading are not cleanly separable on the available record, and distinguishing them requires the relational data set out in Section 4.6. What can be said is that the recurrence pattern fits a network account more comfortably, which is a reason to prefer it and not a reason to treat it as settled.

5.4 The centralisation paradox

The National Testing Agency was established to remove examination administration from state-level bodies. The concerns that prompted the reform are documented rather than inferred. Jain's account describes the environment of political and bureaucratic interference in Indian administration (Jain, 1995), Hota's analysis sets out the institutional expectations attached to centralised examining (Hota, 2012), and the state returns cited in Section 4.4 record the pattern in figures, including 33 registered paper-leak cases in a single state over one decade with 49 government servants among those arrested. What the record supports is that state-level examining had a demonstrated vulnerability. Whether centralisation was the right response is a separate question.

Centralisation delivered against that diagnosis and produced a second-order effect the diagnosis did not anticipate. Consider what changes when a single agency administers a single paper to millions of candidates across every state. The number of principals shrinks, which was the point. The consequence of any single breach expands by the same logic, because the compromised paper is now the only paper. Under the previous arrangement a leak in one state commission damaged one state's recruitment cycle. Under the current arrangement a leak damages a national cohort.

The principal-agent structure compounds this. The agency does not own most of the operational surface through which its examinations are delivered; it contracts for it. Rich's finding applies directly, in that the capacity which matters operationally sits with contractors while the authority that matters legally sits with the agency, and the gap between them is where accountability dissipates (Rich, 2023). Indian commentary in the medical education literature has converged on similar conclusions from a practitioner standpoint, with Ranjan, Kain and Kumar calling for structural reform of NEET-UG administration and Gupta proposing specific procedural changes (Ranjan et al., 2024; Gupta, 2025). Ranjan and Sarkar's discussion of an undergraduate exit examination indicates that the same institutional questions arise at the other end of medical training (Ranjan & Sarkar, 2021), and Ananthakrishnan's earlier scepticism about the examination's design anticipated aspects of the debate (Ananthakrishnan, 2018). A Lancet editorial had raised the underlying reform question more than a decade earlier (The Lancet, 2011).

The paradox can be stated without exaggeration. Centralisation reduced the number of points at which discretion could be exercised and increased the consequence of failure at each remaining point. Whether that trade is favourable depends on whether the reduction in breach frequency exceeds the increase in breach severity, and the available public record does not permit the calculation, because no breach-frequency series on a comparable basis before and after the transition has been published. The claim made here is therefore conditional. If breach frequency has not fallen substantially, centralisation has worsened aggregate outcomes, and the visible pattern of nationwide cancellations is consistent with frequency not having fallen substantially. The staggered design in Section 4.5 is the route by which that condition could be settled.

5.5 State capacity disaggregated

The rent-seeking account explains why capture is attempted. It does not explain why capture succeeds in some administrative environments and fails in others, and the state-capacity literature reviewed earlier supplies the missing term without needing to be restated here.

Applying it to examinations produces an observation with an uncomfortable circularity. The examination system under discussion is the mechanism through which India recruits the bureaucracy whose quality determines whether such systems can be administered securely. A compromised selection process degrades the administrative stock, and a degraded administrative stock is less able to protect the selection process. Whether this circle has operated to any measurable degree is not established by anything in the public record, and the

claim is offered as a structural observation rather than as a finding. Braibanti's much earlier reflections on bureaucratic corruption identified the same self-reinforcing quality in the administrative systems of newly independent states, which indicates that the observation is old rather than novel (Braibanti, 1962).

Treating state capacity as a single explanatory quantity obscures a real distinction. Different capacities bind at different stages of the examination process, and a system can be strong in one and weak in another. Five dimensions are worth separating.

Administrative capacity is the ability to conduct an examination at scale: to register candidates, allocate centres, print and distribute material, and process results within a cycle. Indian agencies demonstrate this capacity at volumes few systems attempt, and it is not the binding constraint. Monitoring capacity is the ability to supervise the process while it runs, including the ability to observe what contracted parties are doing, and this is where outsourcing bites, because the agency retains authority over a surface it cannot see. Enforcement capacity is the ability to detect a breach and carry it to an outcome, and Section 6.3 argues that this is the binding constraint and that the reform record has left it largely untouched. Technical capacity is the ability to secure systems and, distinctly, to analyse the data those systems generate; the two are separable, and the Indian case is stronger in the first than in the second. Coordinative capacity is the ability to align multiple agencies, namely a national examining body, state police forces, a central investigative agency, district administration and private vendors.

The dimensions bind at different stages. Administrative and technical capacity govern the setting, printing and distribution stages. Monitoring and coordinative capacity govern delivery, which is the stage now largely contracted out, and the cross-state clustering described in Section 5.2 is as much a coordination failure as an enforcement one. Enforcement capacity governs everything after the breach, and is the dimension on which the deterrent effect of the entire legal architecture rests.

6. INSTITUTIONAL ADAPTATION: THE LEGISLATIVE RESPONSE

6.1 The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024

The Act passed the Lok Sabha on 6 February 2024 and the Rajya Sabha on 9 February 2024, ahead of the examination cycle whose failures dominated that year's public debate.

Its penalty structure is more differentiated than most commentary allows, and the differentiation matters for the argument. Persons resorting to unfair means faced imprisonment of three to five years and a fine of up to Rs 10 lakh. Service providers faced a fine of up to Rs 1 crore, recovery of proportionate examination costs, and a four-year bar from examination work. Where the consent or connivance of a director or senior manager of a service provider was established, that individual faced three to ten years and a fine of Rs 1 crore. Organised crime under the Act carried five to ten years and a fine of not less than Rs 1 crore, with provision for attachment and forfeiture of property.

A correction is required here because the error is widespread. Secondary accounts frequently report a maximum fine of Rs 10 crore under the 2024 Act. No provision of that Act as enacted exceeds Rs 1 crore. The figure appears to originate in conflation with state instruments, since the Uttar Pradesh ordinance pairs a Rs 1 crore fine with life imprisonment and several state laws carry their own schedules. Analysis that attributes Rs 10 crore to the 2024 Act is analysing a statute that does not exist. A figure of Rs 10 crore does now appear in the central regime, introduced by the 2026 amendment discussed below, and it appears as a minimum rather than a maximum and only for organised crime, which is a different provision from the one usually described.

Read against the expected-utility equation in Section 3.2, the Act operates almost entirely on C. It raised penalties, extended liability to corporate officers, made offences cognizable and non-bailable, and provided for expedited investigation. It did comparatively little to Pd. Investigative capacity for offences of this type, meaning digital forensic capability, capacity to trace encrypted transmission, and the ability to establish chain of custody at the setting and moderation stage, is not created by a sentencing schedule.

One provision does bear on Ps rather than C, and it attracted less attention than the penalties. The service-provider liability regime, with its bar on future work and its cost-recovery mechanism, alters the incentives of

the contractors on whom Section 5.1 places the operational surface. A vendor facing exclusion from a national market has reason to invest in internal controls that no criminal penalty on individual candidates would produce. Whether the provision has been applied is not established in the public record, and an unapplied liability rule changes behaviour only to the extent that firms expect application.

6.2 The 2026 amendment as institutional adaptation

The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026 was introduced in the Lok Sabha on 27 July 2026, passed that House on 29 July and was passed by the Rajya Sabha on 30 July. Its provisions can be grouped in three, and the grouping matters more than the individual figures.

The first group raises penalties across every category. Imprisonment for resorting to unfair means moves from three to five years to five to ten years, and the maximum fine from Rs 10 lakh to Rs 50 lakh. The maximum fine on service providers moves from Rs 1 crore to Rs 5 crore and their debarment from four years to eight. The minimum term for directors and senior management moves from three years to five, with the fine raised to Rs 5 crore. For organised crime the minimum term moves from five years to seven and the minimum fine from Rs 1 crore to Rs 10 crore.

The second group addresses investigation. The central government is empowered to constitute a special task force, which conducts the investigation exclusively where it has been constituted, and investigation must be completed within two months.

The third group addresses adjudication. Every state and union territory must designate a Court of Session as a Special Fast Track Court, appoint one or more special public prosecutors, and conduct trials from day to day unless a departure is recorded in writing, with trial to conclude within three months of the filing of the chargesheet and pending cases transferred on commencement. Appeals lie directly to the High Court before a bench of two judges, must be filed within 30 days with delay condonable up to 90, and are to be disposed of within three months so far as possible.

To assess what this does to the equilibrium, the three groups can be read against the variables of Section 3.7 rather than against each other. The penalty increases operate on legal deterrence, which the third proposition predicts will have limited effect while detection probability remains low; a fivefold rise in the candidate fine and a fivefold rise in the service-provider maximum both multiply a term that is already being multiplied by a very small number. The special task force and the two-month investigation deadline operate on enforcement capacity, which Section 5.5 identifies as the binding constraint, and are therefore the provisions most likely to move the equilibrium. The fast-track court, the day-to-day trial and the appeal timetable operate on the interval between detection and outcome rather than on detection itself, raising the expected cost of a breach that has been detected without raising the probability of detection, and the deterrence literature indicates that this is the weaker of the two levers (Nagin, 2013). The extended debarment operates on the intermediation mechanism, and is the provision whose logic is best matched to where Section 5.1 locates the operational surface.

The analytical question is not whether the law is stricter. It is whether stricter law changes the equilibrium conditions. On the framework advanced here, provisions that raise enforcement capacity change those conditions, while provisions that raise penalties relocate cost within an arrangement whose reproduction depends on something else. The 2026 amendment does both, and its effect will depend on which of its provisions are resourced. A special task force without forensic capability is a designation rather than a capacity, and a fast-track court without a chargesheet before it has nothing to expedite. The distinction between a designation and a capacity is not visible on the face of a statute, which is why the staggered notification of these bodies across states, as set out in Section 4.5, is the most informative test the reform will offer.

6.3 The illusion of deterrence

The deterrence literature is unambiguous that certainty dominates severity in offender decision-making. Becker's foundational model makes the expected-cost structure explicit, and the policy implication follows from the arithmetic rather than from any behavioural assumption (Becker, 1968). Polinsky and Shavell set out the

conditions under which raising sanctions substitutes for raising detection, and those conditions include an enforcement apparatus capable of applying the sanction (Polinsky & Shavell, 1999). Nagin's review of the empirical evidence concludes that certainty of apprehension rather than severity of punishment carries the deterrent effect that can be identified in data (Nagin, 2013), and Mendes reaches a compatible conclusion while cautioning that the two interact rather than operating independently (Mendes, 2004).

The Indian enforcement record on examination offences supplies an unusually clean illustration. An Indian Express investigation reported two convictions across 45 major leak cases between 2002 and 2025, each case involving more than one hundred thousand candidates, with investigations pending, trials unfinished or the accused on bail in most of the remainder. The convictions that did occur are instructive about the timescale: one was secured in 2025, in respect of a Railway recruitment leak of 2002, against seven railway officials and a constable. This article treats the aggregate figure as indicative rather than established, since conviction counts confound investigative failure, prosecutorial capacity, judicial delay and the possibility that some accused were not culpable.

Read conservatively, the figure implies a detection-and-conviction probability of a few per cent across the most serious category of case. Substituting a P_d of that magnitude into the equation in Section 3.2 leaves expected utility positive across the full range of C permitted by either statute. Raising the candidate fine from Rs 10 lakh to Rs 50 lakh, or the service-provider maximum from Rs 1 crore to Rs 5 crore, multiplies the product of P_d and C by five while P_d keeps that product small. On this reading the deterrent effect of the 2026 amendment's penalty provisions is close to what its predecessor achieved.

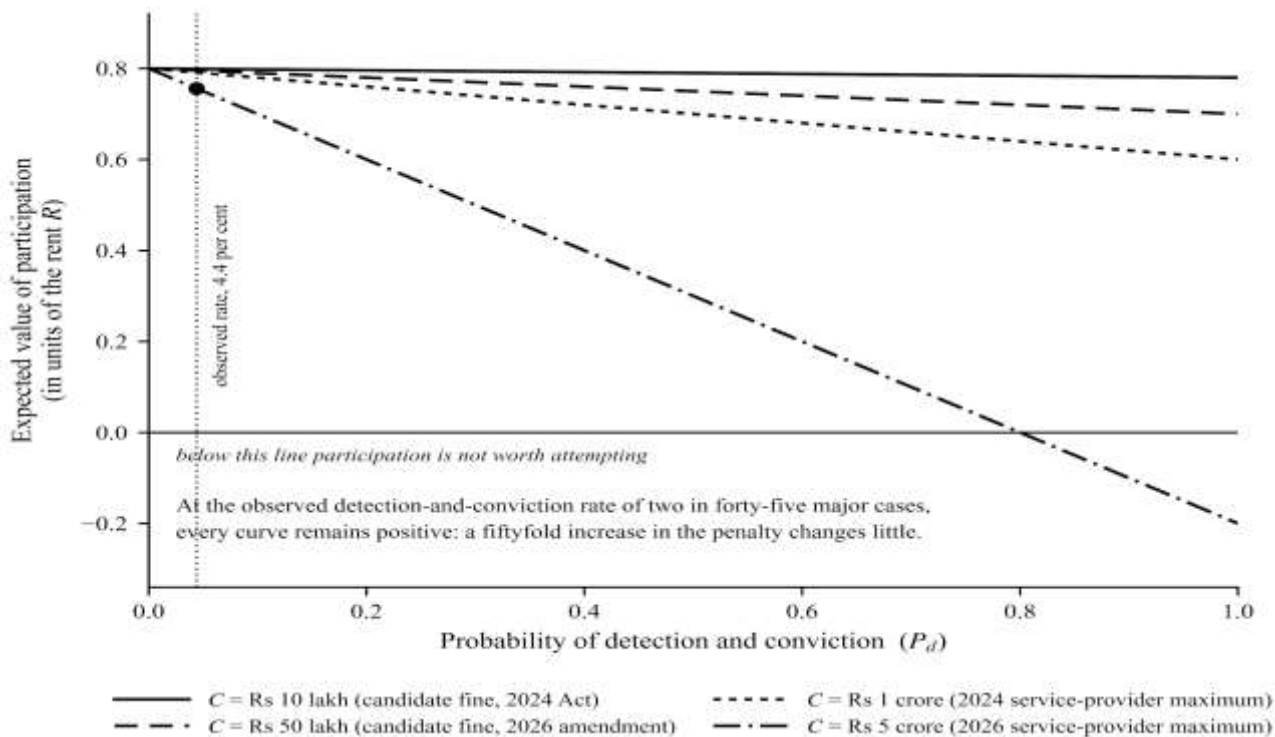


Figure 6: Expected value of participation against the probability of detection, at four statutory penalty levels

(Note: The curves are properties of the equation in Section 3.2 with P_s set at 0.8 and values expressed in units of the rent R . They are not estimates from data. The four penalty levels are the candidate fine and the service-provider maximum under the 2024 Act and under the 2026 amendment. The vertical line marks the detection-and-conviction rate implied by two convictions across 45 major cases.)

Mendes's caution deserves weight against this conclusion. If certainty and severity interact, a severity increase is not inert at low detection probabilities, and it may raise the perceived cost among the subset who believe detection is possible. The argument advanced here is therefore about magnitude rather than direction. Raising C

moves expected utility in the intended direction and moves it very little, and a reform programme that spends its political capital there has chosen the term with the smallest available effect.

6.4 Detection as a technical problem

Detection failure has a technical shape worth specifying, and the specification points toward the methods Section 4.1 noted as absent. Investigative practice has been organised around physical evidence: recovered paper fragments, seized photocopies, testimony from candidates found in possession. Breaches at the setting, translation or moderation stage leave no physical trace of that kind, and breaches transmitted through encrypted platforms leave no accessible transmission record. An investigative apparatus calibrated to the older breach type will systematically under-detect the newer one, and cases will accumulate in closure or deadlock rather than in conviction. The corruption-measurement literature has documented the general problem, in that recorded enforcement outcomes track investigative capability at least as much as underlying incidence (Johnson et al., 1999; Gupta et al., 1998).

A different tradition detects manipulation from the data the examination itself generates, and it has an established record. Jacob and Levitt identify teacher cheating in Chicago through answer-pattern anomalies and unusual score trajectories, without requiring physical evidence or testimony (Jacob & Levitt, 2003). Jara, Riascos and Romero develop methods for detecting answer copying in standardised tests (Jara et al., 2010). Dee, Jacob, Rockoff and McCrary exploit the structure of the New York Regents examinations to identify score manipulation at the level of individual graders (Dee et al., 2011), and Diamond and Persson quantify the long-term consequences of the discretion such manipulation exploits (Diamond & Persson, 2016). Hibel and Penn move the question from individual to institutional explanation, asking whether cheating reflects bad apples or bad orchards (Hibel & Penn, 2020).

The monitoring evidence is more directly relevant to policy design, because it estimates the effect of raising P_d rather than C . Bertoni, Brunello, De Benedetto and De Paola examine external examiners in Italian schools and find that monitoring deters subsequent cheating (Bertoni et al., 2021). Olken's field experiment on Indonesian road projects reaches a compatible conclusion about audit probability in a different domain (Olken, 2005). Martinelli and colleagues establish that cheating responds to incentive structure in measurable ways (Martinelli et al., 2015). The test-security literature supplies the operational counterpart, with Veldkamp and van der Linden addressing exposure control in item pool design, which is the mechanism through which a compromised item damages a testing programme (Veldkamp & van der Linden, 2000), and Ancona Semko and Hunt describing the evidentiary standards such analyses must meet if they are to support action (Ancona Semko & Hunt, 2013).

None of these approaches has been applied systematically to Indian examination data in the published literature, and that absence is the article's clearest actionable finding. An agency administering examinations to millions of candidates generates, as a by-product, the response data on which every method above operates. The data exist. The analysis has either not been done or not been published, and establishing which of those is the case is itself worthwhile, because the first is a gap in research capacity and the second is a decision about disclosure.

Two obstacles should be acknowledged rather than assumed away. Statistical detection identifies anomalies rather than culpability, and the evidentiary gap between the two is what Ancona Semko and Hunt describe (Ancona Semko & Hunt, 2013). Publishing such analyses also creates a roadmap for evasion, which is a genuine argument for restricted circulation rather than for not conducting the work.

A further consideration favours this route over the alternatives, and it concerns cost. Physical security at every node scales with the number of nodes, and the number of nodes scales with candidate volume. Statistical detection scales with computation. An examination administered to millions of candidates generates a dataset whose analysis costs roughly what the analysis of a smaller dataset costs, while the physical apparatus protecting the same examination costs a great deal more at each increment of volume. The economics favour the analytical route. The institutional incentives do not, because a physical measure is visible to the public and a statistical one is not, and that asymmetry between what is visible and what is effective runs through the whole reform record described in Section 9.2.

6.5 Security-centric and system-wide reform: the transport proposal

Proposals to move examination material under military-grade custody, including the use of Air Force transport, have been raised in Indian public debate following large breaches. The proposal is worth examining as an institutional case rather than advocating or opposing it, because it isolates the difference between the two reform logics this article has distinguished.

The security-centric logic treats the transport and storage stage as the vulnerable node and hardens it, through high-security custody, military logistics and a chain of control removed from district administration. Within its own terms the measure would likely succeed, since material in military custody is harder to intercept than material in a district strong room.

The system-wide logic asks what happens to pressure that the hardened node no longer absorbs. Section 5.1 locates the largest recent change at the setting and moderation stage and at vendor-operated delivery, neither of which transport hardening touches. Printing security, vendor governance, digital storage, personnel screening, institutional accountability and investigative capacity are the elements the system-wide logic would address, and they are distributed across the whole lifecycle rather than concentrated at one point.

Three outcomes are possible, and the framework predicts the second. Vulnerabilities may disappear, which requires that transport was the binding node. They may migrate, which requires only that some other node is exploitable at acceptable cost. Or actors may adapt in ways that reconstitute the capability elsewhere in the chain. The displacement mechanism specified in Section 3.7 predicts migration, and the fourth proposition states the observable implication, which is that the modal breach node should shift rather than the breach rate falling. The transport proposal is therefore best read not as a bad measure but as one whose evaluation requires attention to what it does not cover.

7. THE CASE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

To guard against a diagnosis that attributes to national particularity what belongs to system design, the Indian case can be placed beside others.

Examination corruption is documented across widely differing institutional settings. Heyneman, Anderson and Nuraliyeva establish the international scale of the problem in higher education (Heyneman et al., 2008). Osipian traces how education corruption became structural rather than incidental during post-Soviet institutional transition in Russia (Osipian, 2009), and Denisova-Schmidt and Prytula characterise the resulting condition as endemic (Denisova-Schmidt & Prytula, 2020). Sadana Sabharwal and Freeman's recent treatment of academic corruption in Indian higher education places the present case within that comparative frame (Sadana Sabharwal & Freeman, 2025).

The East Asian comparison is the most informative, because it holds examination stakes roughly constant while varying administrative arrangements. Zhan's account of gaokao migration describes candidates and families relocating to exploit jurisdictional differences in a national examination system with stakes comparable to India's (Zhan, 2022), and Kell and Kell situate high-stakes testing across the region within a wider set of pressures (Kell & Kell, 2013). What the comparison indicates is that extreme stakes generate circumvention wherever they appear, and that the form circumvention takes is determined by which margin is cheapest to exploit: jurisdictional arbitrage where residence rules are the weak point, material compromise where delivery chains are.

Two conclusions follow. The Indian pattern is a variant of a general phenomenon rather than a national peculiarity, which suggests that explanations resting on culture or on the character of particular institutions are looking in the wrong place. The comparison also sets a limit on the state-capacity explanation of Section 5.5, because systems with considerably stronger administrative apparatus experience examination manipulation, as the Italian and American evidence in Section 6.4 demonstrates. Capacity determines the scale and the form of manipulation rather than its presence. An account attributing Indian breaches solely to weak capacity would predict their absence where capacity is strong, and that prediction fails. Stakes create the pressure. Capacity shapes where it emerges.

8. DISTRIBUTION: WHO BEARS THE COST

The rent-seeking framework treats the losses from capture as dissipation, which is accurate in aggregate and silent about incidence. Incidence is where the political stakes of this subject actually sit.

Three groups bear the cost, and they bear different kinds. Candidates who do not purchase access lose position to those who do, and the loss is not diffuse: in a rank-ordered allocation with a fixed number of seats, every purchased selection displaces a specific candidate who would otherwise have been selected. Where purchase requires sums corresponding to several years of median household earnings, as Section 5.2 indicates, the displaced candidates are systematically drawn from households unable to transact at that level.

That makes the incidence a question about existing stratification. Banerjee and Knight's evidence on caste discrimination in the Indian urban labour market establishes that access to positions was already structured by ascriptive characteristics before any examination breach (Banerjee & Knight, 1985), and Khora's treatment of caste, reservation and discrimination sets out the legal architecture built in response (Khora, 2024). Bertrand, Hanna and Mullainathan provide the closest available evidence on how examination-based allocation interacts with that architecture (Bertrand et al., 2008). A breach operating through willingness to pay redistributes toward households with liquidity, and the correlation between liquidity and existing advantage does the rest.

The second group is the successful candidate whose credential is devalued by doubt. Where cancellations and re-examinations become routine, the signal that selection transmits weakens for everyone holding it, which is a cost falling on precisely the candidates the system selected correctly.

The third is the public receiving services from those selected. If selection is partly decoupled from the attributes it purports to measure, the composition of the resulting professional cohort changes. Muralidharan and Sundararaman's evidence on teacher performance in India indicates that the quality of selected personnel has measurable consequences for outcomes (Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2009), and Pritchett situates the point within a wider argument about the politics of educational systems (Pritchett, 2019). The magnitude of this effect in the present case is unknown, and claiming otherwise would exceed what the evidence supports. The direction is not in doubt.

A caution belongs here. Nothing in the available evidence establishes what share of any selected cohort obtained selection improperly, and the share is likely small. The distributional argument does not require it to be large. It requires only that the displacement be non-random, and the pricing evidence establishes that.

One implication runs against a common framing of the issue. Public debate on examination breaches is conducted largely in the language of merit betrayed, which locates the wrong at the point where an undeserving candidate is selected. The distributional analysis locates it elsewhere. What is lost is a position, and the loss falls on an identifiable person who is not the person the breach is usually said to have wronged. Framing the problem as one of measurement invites remedies aimed at accuracy. Framing it as one of displacement invites remedies aimed at the allocation itself, and the second framing is the one this article's evidence supports.

There is a further asymmetry worth naming. A candidate who purchases access and is detected faces the penalties Sections 6.1 and 6.2 describe. The displaced candidate has no standing, no notification and no remedy, since the counterfactual in which they were selected is not something any process establishes. Compensation is therefore unavailable even in principle under the current design. Cancellation and re-examination, the standard response, imposes fresh costs on the entire cohort so as to address a wrong done to part of it.

9. Implications And Reform Options

9.1 Contribution to the literatures

The framework advanced here bears on five bodies of scholarship. To the state-capacity literature it offers a disaggregation that the examination case makes unusually legible, since capacity is not one quantity and a system can be simultaneously strong enough to examine millions and too weak to detect that it has been compromised; the five dimensions in Section 5.5 are separable in principle and appear separable in this case. To governance studies it offers the accountability gap between operational capacity and legal authority as a mechanism rather than as a description, applying Rich's shadow-state-capacity formulation to a setting where the transferred function is the integrity of a national allocation device (Rich, 2023). To rent-seeking scholarship it offers a case in which the rent is created not by a licence or a tariff but by the interaction of enrolment expansion and public-employment contraction, and in which the seeking is organised through an intermediary sector that is itself legal. To public administration it offers the centralisation paradox, a reform that reduced the number of principals and thereby raised the consequence of any single failure, with a net effect the available public record does not permit calculating. To education governance it offers the argument that examination integrity is not separable from examination stakes, and that reforms addressed to the instrument leave the pressure on it unchanged.

A methodological contribution belongs alongside these. Frequency claims in work on examination integrity are routinely built on case counts drawn from a detected subset of unknown size, and the distinction developed in Section 4.3 between the leakage rate and the detected-breach rate offers a way of bounding that subset instead of ignoring it.

9.2 Reform options and their costs

Four interventions follow from the analysis, each addressing a different term in the equation of Section 3.2, and each carrying a cost that the Indian policy debate has tended to leave unstated.

In-sourcing delivery infrastructure addresses the accountability gap identified in Section 5.1. Returning test delivery, candidate authentication and centre operation to direct public control would close the space between operational capacity and legal authority that Rich identifies as the characteristic vulnerability of contracted-out functions (Rich, 2023). The cost is substantial and is fiscal, administrative and temporal at once, since the state would need to build capability it deliberately divested, at a moment when examination volumes are at their historical peak. Hood's warning cuts in both directions, because over-outsourcing and under-outsourcing are both failure modes and the literature offers no formula for locating the boundary (Hood, 1997). A partial alternative deserves consideration, since the full version is unlikely to be adopted: the service-provider liability regime already in force, now extended to an eight-year debarment and a Rs 5 crore maximum, operates on contractor incentives without requiring the state to rebuild capability. Its effectiveness depends entirely on application, and application depends on detection, which returns the problem to Pd.

Raising detection probability is the intervention the analysis most directly supports and the one the policy debate has least developed. Section 6.4 sets out what it would involve: statistical analysis of response data as a standing function rather than a forensic afterthought, item-exposure monitoring, and investigative capability matched to breaches that leave digital rather than physical traces. Bertoni and colleagues indicate the effect is real in comparable settings (Bertoni et al., 2021), and Olken suggests the mechanism generalises beyond education (Olken, 2005). The costs here are lower than for in-sourcing and are not zero. Statistical detection generates false positives, and a system that acts on anomalies without an evidentiary standard will produce injustices of its own. Building the capability inside the agency that administers the examinations also creates an obvious conflict, since that agency has an institutional interest in the answer. Independent analysis, with restricted publication for the reasons Section 6.4 gives, is the arrangement that follows from those two considerations.

Regulating the coaching sector's structural ties addresses proximity rather than conduct. The measures that follow from Section 3.5 concern ownership and disclosure rather than pedagogy: mandatory disclosure of ownership links between coaching institutions and test-centre operators, financial transparency requirements, and conflict-of-interest firewalls between preparation and administration. Disclosure has a second value, since

the register it creates is the dataset that Section 4.6 requires in order to test the proposition on which the measure rests. The cost is regulatory capacity in a sector that is large, fragmented, politically connected and partly informal, and regulation of this kind tends to bind the compliant.

Expanding the supply of seats and posts addresses R itself, and is the only intervention that operates on the source rather than the symptom. Reducing scarcity reduces the rent, and reducing the rent reduces what participation is worth. The cost is the largest of the four and the least tractable within examination policy, since it requires sustained public investment in higher education capacity and in employment creation, on a horizon measured in decades. It also carries the risk Section 3.4 identified, since credentials expanded without positions move the contest to a further margin instead of ending it (Spence, 1973; Arrow, 1973).

Two further considerations bear on the package as a whole. Transparency instruments are a complement rather than a substitute, since Larreguy and Raffler indicate that information reaches outcomes through political channels that vary in their responsiveness (Larreguy & Raffler, 2025), and Singh's account of biometric identification in India is a caution about technological fixes whose exclusion costs fall on the least advantaged (Singh, 2021); authentication technology addresses impersonation, which is not the breach type this article has described. And sequencing matters, because an intervention package that raised detection probability while leaving the rent intact would suppress the observable equilibrium without dissolving it.

9.3 A policy-priority matrix

To make the trade-offs comparable, Table 4 sets the four interventions and their components against the term each addresses, what it costs, and how long it takes to bear on the outcome. The ordering follows from the framework rather than from feasibility, and the two diverge.

Table 4: Policy-priority matrix for examination integrity

Intervention	Term addressed	Effect on the equilibrium	Principal cost	Time to effect	Priority
Standing statistical analysis of response data	Detection probability	Raises certainty, which is the binding term	False positives; evidentiary standard; conflict of interest if housed in the examining agency	One to three cycles	First
Resourcing the special task force and digital forensic capability	Detection probability	Converts a statutory designation into an operational capacity	Recurrent budget; specialist recruitment and retention	One to three years	First
Applying the debarment and cost-recovery provisions against providers	Selection probability; intermediation	Alters contractor incentives without rebuilding state capability	Conditional on detection; litigation risk	One to two years	Second
Mandatory disclosure of ownership links between coaching institutions and centre operators	Intermediation	Addresses the least visible part of the delivery surface and creates the register needed to test the claim	Regulatory capacity in a fragmented, partly informal sector	Two to four years	Second

In-sourcing delivery infrastructure	Selection probability; monitoring capacity	Closes the gap between operational capacity and legal authority	Fiscal, administrative and temporal; capability was deliberately divested	Five to ten years	Third
Expanding the supply of seats and posts	Discounted lifetime rent	Operates on the source of the rent rather than on its symptoms	Sustained public investment; relocates the bottleneck if credentials expand without positions	A decade or more	Third, and unavoidable
Further increases in statutory penalties	Legal deterrence	Multiplies a term already multiplied by a very small probability	Political capital spent on the least responsive margin	Immediate in law, negligible in effect	Lowest

Two features of the ordering deserve comment. The interventions ranked first are the cheapest and the least visible, while those ranked third are the most expensive and the most politically legible, which is the asymmetry Section 6.4 describes and a sufficient explanation of the observed reform record. And the ordering is a sequence rather than a menu. The first two operate on Pd, the next two on Ps and on intermediation, and the last on R. Raising Pd without touching R suppresses the equilibrium and relocates it, in the manner the fourth proposition predicts, so the interventions in the third tier are what prevent the first tier from producing displacement instead of deterrence. None is sufficient alone.

10. LIMITATIONS

This article is a theoretical and interpretive contribution rather than an empirical test, and its claims should be read within that scope. The empirical strategy of Sections 4.3 to 4.6 is set out as a design and has not been executed here; the panel it describes remains to be assembled, and no estimate in this article rests on it.

The analysis relies on public records, statutory text, policy documents, administrative returns, investigative filings, court and press reporting, and secondary scholarship, and these layers differ substantially in evidential strength. Statutory analysis rests on public provisions whose reading is not seriously contested, while the operational account of intermediary networks rests on filings and reporting shaped by what investigators sought and what proved newsworthy. Allegations described in Sections 3.5, 5.1 and 5.2 are before the courts and are reported as allegations. Evidence on informal networks and on linkages to the coaching sector is uneven, and the article marks throughout where adjacency is being distinguished from documented transaction.

The case is also internally varied. Examination systems differ across states and across examining bodies in scale, administrative arrangement and contracting practice, and the framework does not attempt to specify that variation. The study includes no process tracing, no interviews with candidates, intermediaries or officials, no access to administrative datasets, and no fieldwork in coaching hubs or at test centres, and each of these absences bears on the propositions in Section 3.8. Future research using comparative designs across states and examinations, mixed-method work combining response-data analysis with qualitative investigation, and process tracing of individual breach cycles would be capable of testing the relationships specified here. These limitations define the scope of the framework rather than invalidate its explanatory value.

11. CONCLUSION

Recurrent examination breaches in India are better understood as the output of a stable arrangement than as a sequence of failures. Extreme scarcity in seats and posts generates a large rent; the rent attracts organised capture; capture is executed through an outsourced delivery chain the commissioning agency does not control; and enforcement rarely reaches those responsible. Each element is documented independently. Their combination is what makes the pattern durable.

Two claims here rest on firmer ground than the others. That competitive examinations function as rationing mechanisms generating substantial rents follows from the seat-to-candidate ratios and from the character of what selection confers. That the legislation of 2024 and 2026 operates on penalty severity rather than on detection probability is established by the statutory schedules themselves, set beside a conviction record of two cases in forty-five, and the arithmetic of expected utility then does the rest.

The centralisation paradox is weaker, because establishing it properly requires breach-frequency data on a comparable basis before and after the National Testing Agency assumed its current role, and that data has not been published. The claim about the coaching sector's structural position is weaker still, resting on adjacency rather than on documented transactions between institutes and syndicates. The methodology states, for each of these, what evidence would settle it.

The analysis carries a methodological caution that applies to the wider literature on examination integrity. Much of what is known publicly comes from investigative filings and press reporting, both of which are shaped by what investigators looked for and what proved newsworthy. A breach that left no physical trace and generated no cancellation may not appear in any source consulted here. The pattern described in this article is therefore a pattern in the detected subset, and the argument of Section 6.3 implies that the detected subset is small and non-randomly selected.

That observation converges with the article's most concrete recommendation. Research capable of addressing the selection problem would begin where Jacob and Levitt began, with statistical detection on response data rather than with the investigative record. The data are generated as a by-product of administering the examinations. Applying to them the methods that identified manipulation in Chicago, in New York and in Italian schools would establish whether the detected subset is a reasonable sample of the whole or a small and unrepresentative corner of it. Until that is done, every frequency claim in this literature, including the conditional one advanced here about centralisation, rests on cases that came to light for reasons unrelated to how often such cases occur. What the examination system rations, in the end, is not merit but position. Reforms that improve the accuracy of measurement leave that function untouched, which is why two decades of security improvement have not produced two decades of declining breaches.

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Declarations

Ethical approval: This article is a theoretical and documentary analysis of published statutes, policy documents, judicial and investigative records, administrative returns and secondary scholarship. It involves no human or animal participants, and no ethical approval was required.

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Data availability: No new data was collected. All primary materials cited are publicly available statutes, legislative records, official documents and published scholarship, and are identified in the references and in the statutory and documentary sources listed below. The figures in this article are generated from the analytical equation in Section 3.2 and contain no empirical estimates; the scripts producing them are available from the author.

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