The Agnipath Scheme for Armed Forces

What is the issue?

Massive protests demanding the rollback of the Agnipath scheme is continuing across the country.

How are candidates recruited to the service at present?

- **Short Service Commission (SSC)-** SSC officers are presently inducted under the 10+4 scheme.
- Here, the officer serves for 10 years and can either opt out of service or extend the service by 4 years.
- They can resign at any time during the 4 year period.
- **Permanent Commission (PC)**- A Permanent Commission means a career in the service till retirement.
- The Supreme Court directed the government to ensure that women officers, irrespective of their years of service, are granted PC in the army.

What is Agnipath Scheme about?

- Tour of Duty, or Agnipath, is a scheme under which the forces will recruit soldiers for short-term and long-term on an 'All-India All-Class' basis.
- **Aim-** To reduce the salaries and pensions to divert resources for military modernisation.
- **Eligibility-** Those between the ages 17.5 and 21 years will be eligible to apply.
- The required educational qualification will be Class 10-12, depending on the service and assigned role.
- **Recruitment-** The Centre will recruit Agniveers and the induction process will repeat every six months.
- The recruitment of women will depend on the requirements of their respective services.
- **Training-** The training will go on for a maximum of six months, post which an Agniveer will be deployed for the remaining three and a half years.
- **Selection process-** An online centralised system will be used for enrolment of Agniveers and the selection will be the exclusive jurisdiction of the armed forces.
- **Permanent enrolment-** After completing 4 years of service, Agniveers will be eligible to apply for permanent enrolment in the armed forces.
- Up to 25% of them will be selected on an objective basis and enrolled as regular cadre.
- They will have to serve for a further minimum of 15 years.
- Adequate re-employment opportunities will be created for the rest 75% who will move out of the services and return to society.
- **Pension**- Agniveers will not be eligible for any pensionary or gratuity benefits under the scheme.
- **Exemption**- The scheme does not apply to defence officers for whom there is a provision called Short Service Commission or SSC.

Currently, the Army recruits young people under the SSC for an initial tenure of 10 years, extending up to 14 years.

What benefits will be extended to Agniveers?

- **Salary**- The Agniveers will receive an annual package of Rs. 4.76 lakh in the first year to Rs. 6.92 lakh in the fourth year.
- **Allowances**- In addition to monthly salary, these recruits will be paid allowances for travel and uniform.
- **Honours and Awards-** They will also be entitled to honours, and awards as per existing guidelines.
- **Seva Nidhi**- Agniveers will contribute 30% of their salaries to a fund that will be matched by the government.
- This fund will accrue interest, and at the end of the four years, each soldier will get Rs.11.71 lakh as a lump sum tax-free amount, which includes interest accumulated on the absolute amount.
- **Leaves-** An Agniveer will be granted 30-day annual leave while sick leave will be based on medical advice.
- **Insurance cover-** The Agniveers will be provided non-contributory life insurance cover of Rs. 48 lakh during their service in the armed forces.

How is the Tour of Duty different from conscription?

- Conscription refers to the mandatory of youth in the national armed forces.
- Countries that follow the practice of conscription include Israel, Norway, North Korea, and Sweden.
- However, ToD is not compulsory but provides an opportunity for India's youth to experience military life without having to join the armed forces on a long-term basis.

What is the need for such a scheme?

- **Military exposure**- Agnipath scheme or Tour of Duty exposes a larger section of Indian population to the military way of life and gives them a wider exposure.
- **Disciplined workforce**- It provides the nation with a large pool of disciplined workforce, with varied skill sets.
- **Beyond regional outlook**- This scheme will make citizens rule-abiding and raise them above narrow regional and sectarian outlook, besides enhancing their physical fitness levels.
- **Reservists-** The trained workforce can also act as reservists in times of national emergency.
- **Address personnel shortage**- This recruitment model has been conceptualised to address personnel shortages, including officers.
- **Employment** - It has been proposed as a means to generate increased employment opportunities, with the goal of ensuring that 40% of the personnel are recruited through this medium.

What are the mounting criticisms against the scheme?

In the Union Budget 2022-23, Rs 5.25 lakh crore were allocated to defence. Of this, defence pensions added up to Rs 1.19 lakh crore.

- **Slashing the expenditure**- The reform is criticised for its move to slash the growing salary and pension bills of the three services.
- **Diluting the professionalism**- The scheme has been accused of diluting the professionalism of the armed forces.
- **Reduced efficiency**- The process will result in mixed units that will lack cohesion and regimentation, which will reduce their effectiveness.
- **Against induction of women**- There is also a criticism that with the induction of women in all trades, a unit's fighting efficiency and rigour will reduce.
- **Political militias**- There is an apprehension that the youthful population with military training could create political militias, if they cannot find suitable employment avenues.
- **Lack of reservation**- Reservation for former Agniveers in jobs in both central government and state governments is lacking.
- **Suspension of recruitment**- Already the recruitment process was suspended for the last two years due to COVID.

References

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