



Critically Analyse Why the Agnipath Scheme, Although Highly Criticized, is a Bold Decision Towards Modernization of the Armed Forces. (250 Words / 15 M) (GS-3 Internal Security)

Approach :

1. Introduction about Agnipath scheme.
2. Briefly mention the key provisions.
3. Point out the main criticisms.
4. Mention the budgetary issue with modernization vs manpower.
5. Mention the favoring views.
6. Conclusion.

Indian cabinet has recently cleared the **Agnipath scheme**, terming it as a **transformative reform** in India's armed forces. It will provide **"unique opportunity to the youth to serve and contribute to nation-building"**, making the armed forces **youthful and dynamic**. By recruiting **'Agni veers'** in the age group of **17.5 to 23 years**, it will make the Indian military **"young & fit"**. It also offers **attractive financial package** and **adequate re-employment opportunities** for those returning to society. The policy reads, **"it will ensure availability of well-disciplined & skilled youth with military ethos in civil society"**.

About Agnipath Scheme: the scheme is for personnel recruitment **below officer rank** for **4 years**. Upon completion of 4 years, based on organizational requirements, Agni veers can apply for **permanent enrolment in Armed Forces**. Up to **25% of each batch** will be enrolled in regular cadres. They would be required to **serve a further engagement period of 15 years**. Agni veers will be given an **attractive customized monthly package** with **"Risk & Hardship" allowances** as applicable. **Each month** they will **contribute a fixed sum to a corpus fund** with **equal match by government**. Upon completion, Agni veers will receive a **one-time 'Seva Nidhi' package (approx. 11.71 lakh)** comprising their contribution & govt contribution along with interests accrued. It is **tax exempted**. However, there shall be **no gratuity or pensionary benefits**.

Criticism Galore: many veteran armed personnel have criticized against the Agnipath scheme.

- They raised concern that **combat soldier cannot be trained in 4 years**, and that the scheme can potentially **compromise national security**. The idea of shortened training indirectly **trivializes the skill-sets** for which the armed forces train their cadres so diligently.
- Also, retrenching youth from the armed forces after 4 years can create security problems. Given the **lesser experience**, Agni veers are **difficult to get absorbed into paramilitary forces**. Mostly, the retired personnel cannot find respectable employment and hence, are entirely dependent on their **pension and post retirement benefits** to sustain; the Agni veers will **lose** that too. At a tender age, if **unemployed**, they can **fall prey to crime syndicates, radical political outfits and rouge foreign intelligence**



agencies.

- Trained in **handling weapons** and having **basic knowledge of military establishments' functioning**, they can be **real security threat**, some more enterprising can join **overseas mercenary groups** and **private military contractors**.
- No attention to detail, **political logic overriding institutional sanity**.

The move's prime inspiration: the government is concerned that **manpower costs are eating into the capital allocation** of the armed forces to cover revenue demand. India's **defense budget is 5.25 lakh crore** of which **1.2 lakh crore goes for pension** component, let alone salaries. Estimates say, of the **44.37%** earmarked for services' **revenue expenditure, 29.01% goes for meeting capital requirements**, and **22.79% for defense pensions**. The **salaries + pensions** account for **55.3%** of the total revenue budget. This salaries & pension component has been **steadily increasing**.

Arguments in favor: Advocates argue that **National defense budget management** is essential for **modernization of forces**. There has to be a **significant % for capital acquisitions**. No major country can afford to have adverse capital to revenue expenditure and pension bill ratios. So, they say, the best way to achieve this is to **reduce the workforce**. Taking **inspiration from all major armed forces** across the world like **China, Great Britain, US** – who have cut their workforce in the last 25 years, India has embarked on downsizing its armed forces for '**leaner, meaner army**'.

But **mean does not imply weaker** military. The reduced workforce will leave **more resources for capital expenditure** towards **new technologies** and **more intelligent systems** like **ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance)** and **unmanned systems** to **reduce casualties**. With these, Indian armed forces can become **more agile, flexible, lethal and innovative**. Its **extended technological edge** can be **more destructive** than numerical strength.

The Armed Forces need support and reform. Agnipath may have come at a right time. A **shift from reliance on personnel to technology** and a **younger age profile** of soldiers are laudatory goals. But **reforms** should be governed by a **sound sociological, professional, institutional and strategic logic**.