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News Juice – 21st June, 2022

1. What is Agnipath Scheme? Why is Agnipath under widespread attack?

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance

Large-scale violence by distressed youth broke out in many parts of India, notably in States such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, and Telangana which contribute a sizeable manpower to the armed forces, in the wake of the Centre announcing, on June 14, a new scheme of recruitment of jawans, personnel below officer ranks (PBORs), to the three wings.

What is the scheme?

Agnipath or Tour of Duty will be the only mode of recruitment of soldiers, sailors, and airmen from now on. It envisages enlisting youths aged between 17.5 years and 21 years — the upper limit has been extended to 23 years this year after protests — for a period of just four years, also counting their training time. At the expiry of their contract, only 25% of these soldiers, to be known as Agniveers, will be re-enlisted for regular military service.

While the salary package of Agniveers will be around ₹4.76 lakh in the first year which can go up to ₹6.92 lakh in the fourth year, these short-term soldiers will also be offered a contributory severance package besides non-contributory death and disability compensation. They will not be eligible for pension or gratuity.

Other defence related jobs

A day after the scheme was unveiled by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in the presence of the Service chiefs, the Union Ministry of Education said it would offer a three-year degree programme to these enlistees in order to make them employable once out of service. As protests rocked the country, the Ministry of Home Affairs, on Saturday, announced its decision to reserve 10% of vacancies in the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) and the Assam Rifles to Agniveers. The Defence Minister also approved of a proposal to earmark 10% of vacancies in Coast Guard, defence civilian jobs and in the defence PSUs for Agniveers provided they meet the eligibility criteria.

What, according to its supporters, are the scheme's benefits?

Defenders of the scheme, which include the three Service chiefs, have maintained that this 'transformational' initiative will make the forces lean and much younger, with the average age of the soldier brought down to about 25 from the present 32 years. It will also ensure the availability

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of a larger share of budget outlay for capital expenditure for the acquisition of hi-tech equipment and platforms because the outlay for pension payout will drop considerably over time. Military training at a young age would make these men returning to the civilian world more disciplined and employable, advocates of the scheme argue.

They say that the military recruitment procedures in many countries such as the U.S., Russia, the U.K., Israel, France and Germany were extensively studied over the past two years before formulating the scheme for Indian conditions.

Why are there protests across States?

Apprehensions about Agnipath are vast and varied. Scores of veterans have played the scheme as an effort to scrimp and save on revenue expenditure at the expense of the forces' operational efficiency or fighting capabilities. Four years is too short a time for a conscript to acquire the skills essential for operating sophisticated systems in the technology-intensive Navy and Air Force. For the Army, which has a regimental system, it is feared to impair the unit's cohesiveness as the soldier on a short-term contract could remain 'risk-averse'.

There are also apprehensions about this path leading to the militarisation of society. Some say that it's unfair to the potential recruit as well, as the absence of a continued employment guarantee at the expiry of four years when he's still in his 20s and without the skillsets or credentials required to make the cut in the civilian/corporate world, could be demoralising. Agnipath cuts at the root of social security and dignity that have lured rural Indian youth to the military fatigue, argue the scheme's detractors.

What is the way forward?

Unmindful of the ongoing protests and reservations expressed by a chunk of military veterans — ironically, also including some habitual votaries of the government — the Centre has stated unequivocally its resolve to go ahead with the reform. The Army and the Air Force have announced their recruitment plans and the Navy is expected to follow suit. Each year, about 45,000 soldiers will be enlisted in the three Services under this scheme. It remains to be seen if amendments such as the extension of their initial service period and mandatory re-enlistment of at least 50% of Agniveers recommended by some veterans would be considered to finetune the scheme. Right now, the protests are continuing unabated. A clearer picture will emerge by the time the recruitment process gets underway.

Source: The Hindu

2. Russia's gateway to global waters

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues



Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca

The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, signed on July 21, 1774 by the Russian and Ottoman Empires after the 1768-74 war between the two powers was one of the most consequential treaties for the global balance of power in the 18th century — it marked the beginning of the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the arrival of the Russians, under Catherine the Great, as a major power in the Black Sea region.

Terms of the Treaty

As part of the treaty, Russia got access to the Black Sea through the Kerch and Azov seaports. More important, Russia gained official status as the protector of the Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire, a clear signal of the waning influence of the High Porte, the Ottoman central administration, within imperial territories.

This clause also left the Crimean Khanate, which had declared independence from the Ottomans, dependent on the Russians. In 1783, nine years after the treaty was signed, Prince Grigory Potemkin, a Grand Admiral in the imperial Russian army and a favourite of Empress Catherine, annexed the Crimean Peninsula in the name of protecting its Christians amidst violent clashes between Christians and Crimean Tatars. The annexation gave Russia seamless access to the Black Sea's warm waters, helping its rise as a naval power.



One may find parallels between the 18th century annexation of Crimea by Empress Catherine and the 2014 annexation of the same region by President Vladimir Putin. If Catherine's annexation anchored Russia as a Black Sea power, Mr. Putin's move allowed Russia to retain Sevastopol, which hosts its Black Sea fleet, and turn Crimea into a platform for force projection.

Steps by Russia to tighten hold over Black Sea

After the invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, Russia further tightened its hold over the Black Sea. Russia has taken the entire Sea of Azov coast and more port cities in the south and south-east, including Mariupol, Berdyansk and Kherson.

The Black Sea is critical for Russia for geo-economic reasons. Russia's northern ports are in the Arctic Ocean, which restricts its outreach to the world. Its gateway to the global waters is the Black Sea, which opens into the Mediterranean Sea through the Turkey-controlled Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits.

Currently, Russia's only naval base outside the former Soviet territories is based in Syria's Tartus in the Mediterranean Sea. While Russia sees the Mediterranean as NATO-dominated waters, it has sought to enhance its presence in the region in recent years. So, from a geopolitical point of view, it's imperative for Moscow to retain its hold over the Black Sea to remain an influential naval power. The Black Sea is also a vital economic artery for Russia to export its hydrocarbons and grains to Turkey and Asian markets.

During the Soviet period, Russia had dominated the Black Sea, which was then dubbed by many the 'Soviet Lake'. Ukraine and Georgia were Soviet republics. Bulgaria and Romania, two other Black Sea basin states, were part of the Soviet-led Eastern bloc. The only country that was out of the Soviet sphere in the Black Sea region during the Cold War was Turkey, a NATO member. Despite Turkey's control over Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, the 1936 Montreux Convention ensures that Russia and other Black Sea countries get access to the straits so that they can seamlessly move both commercial and military vessels in and out of the waters. (The Convention bans non-Black Sea countries' aircraft carriers and submarines from entering the waters.)

But the balance of power in the Black Sea would shift in favour of NATO after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Bulgaria and Romania became NATO members in 2004. Ukraine and Georgia were offered membership in 2008. If they had also joined NATO, Russia would have faced an arc of NATO coast in its gateway to the global waters. But in 2008, Russia made a military intervention in Georgia, practically ending the country's NATO dream. And in 2014, by annexing Crimea, Russia did not only derail Ukraine's NATO plans, but also reasserted its hold over its southern waters. Now, with more territories under its control as the invasion grinds on, Russia is seeking to rewrite the balance of power in the Black Sea to its favour through force.

Source: The Hindu

3. Who is Gustavo Petro, the former guerrilla fighter who will be Colombia's first leftist President?

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Former rebel fighter Gustavo Petro secured 50.5% of the vote in the second round of Colombia's presidential election held on June 19, putting himself in line to become the first leftist President of the country. Petro's victory underlines an ongoing shift of South American politics to the left, which has seen leftist leaders secure victories in Peru last July, and in Chile and Honduras this year.

Support of the 'TikTok generation'

In April last year, Colombia saw a series of anti-establishment protests against corruption, stagnancy, increased taxation during the pandemic, and a new health care reform.

President Iván Duque Márquez of the Democratic Centre Party was criticised for his taxation policy at a time of economic hardship, with jobs having been hit badly, and the fiscal deficit having widened. The attempt to hastily push through Bill 010, which aimed to privatise healthcare, fuelled anger. (The proposal was withdrawn after four days of massive street protests.)

A quarter of Colombia's electorate is of age 28 or younger, and the empty promises of jobs, uncertain prospects for education, poverty and inequalities hit the younger sections of the population the hardest. Ahead of Petro's historic victory, a poll by Invamer showed more than 68% support for him among voters aged 18-24.

Petro's running mate and now Vice President elect Francia Márquez — the first black person in the post — is an environmental and human rights activist whose humble roots and social consciousness struck a chord with the younger generation. Prior to the election, a political analyst had predicted, "The TikTok generation that is very connected to Francia, that is very connected to Petro, is going to be decisive."

Colombia's history of revolutionary violence

Decades earlier, Petro was a part of the urban guerrilla outfit known as M-19. Established in 1970, the M-19 sought to gain power through violence following claims of fraud in that year's elections. Petro, who spent time in jail for illegal arms possession, joined the urban military group at the age of 17, and was among the many university students and artists who fought against the government.

The M-19 was demobilised in 1990 in what is considered a historic success in Colombia's long history of conflict. The group metamorphosed into a political party, and aided in the rewriting of the constitution.

For almost a half century from 1964, a violent Marxist-Leninist insurgency led by the Revolutionary

Armed Forces of Colombia — Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC in Spanish — raged in the country. The violence of groups like the FARC impacted Colombia's relationship with leftist political ideology, and made it difficult for a legitimate political left to take shape and establish itself.

Petro's political career

Petro, who described his victory as one "for God and for the people", wrote on Twitter: "May so much suffering be cushioned by the joy that today floods the heart of the homeland".

Despite his early revolutionary actions, the President elect has spent many years in Colombia's Parliament, having served in the lower house, the Chamber of Representatives, from 1991-94 and then from 1998-2006, before entering the Senate where he served until 2010, and then again from 2018 onward. In between, Petro was Mayor of the capital city of Bogota from 2012 to 2015.

The elections of 2022 marked Petro's third attempt at winning the presidency. He had been defeated by Duque Márquez in 2018. This time, both presidential candidates, Petro and Rodolfo Hernández, had pegged themselves as anti-establishment fighters against the monopoly of the ruling political class.

Colombia's relations with the US

Colombia has been America's most reliable ally and the largest beneficiary of US aid in Latin America. The new government under Petro could lead to significant changes in bilateral relations, especially if Petro follows through on his proposed policies on the war on drugs and the question of Venezuela.

The US has invested significantly to cease the production and export of cocaine in Colombia. Petro has been a critic of the current approach that focuses on eradicating the coca crop, and instead seeks to push developmental projects in rural Colombia and some form of drug legalisation. In addition, both presidential candidates called for a re-evaluation of trade agreements to ensure Colombia's greater benefit.

The US has attempted to cut off Venezuela, run by the authoritarian regime of President Nicolás Maduro, from the world economy. Colombia has been an enthusiastic supporter of America's policy of "maximum pressure" on Caracas. But the sanctions, and the recognition by Washington of opposition leader Juan Guaidó as interim president following the disputed election of 2019, have not yielded the results the US was hoping for.

Petro has stated that he will restore diplomatic relations with Venezuela and hold dialogue to address violence along the long border between the two countries. He has also said he would allow the restarting of trade across the border.

Source: The Indian Express

4. What is a black swan event?

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

A study by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has spoken about the possibility of capital outflows to the tune of \$100 billion (around Rs 7,80,000 crore) from India in case of a major global risk scenario or a “black swan” event.

What is a ‘black swan’ event?

A black swan is a rare, unpredictable event that comes as a surprise and has a significant impact on society or the world. These events are said to have three distinguishing characteristics – they are extremely rare and outside the realm of regular expectations; they have a severe impact after they hit; and they seem probable in hindsight when plausible explanations appear.

When did the term originate?

The black swan theory was put forward by author and investor Nassim Nicholas Taleb in 2001, and later popularised in his 2007 book – The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable. The Sunday Times described his work as one of the 12 most influential books since World War II. In his book, Taleb does not try to lay out a method to predict such events, but instead stresses on building “robustness” in systems and strategies to deal with black swan occurrences and withstand their impact.

The term itself is linked to the discovery of black swans. Europeans believed all swans to be white until 1697, when a Dutch explorer spotted the first black swan in Australia. The metaphor ‘black swan event’ is derived from this unprecedented spotting from the 17th century, and how it upended the West’s understanding of swans.

When have such events occurred in the past?

Interestingly, Taleb’s book predated the 2008 global financial crisis – a black swan event triggered by a sudden crash in the booming housing market in the US. The fall of the Soviet Union, the terrorist attack in the US on September 11, 2001, also fall in the same category.

Is the Covid-19 pandemic a black swan event?

Taleb does not agree with those who believe it to be one. In an interview to Bloomberg in 2020, he called it a “white swan”, arguing that it was predictable, and there was no excuse for companies and governments not to be prepared for something like this.

While the outbreak of any pandemic is difficult to individually predict, the possibility of one occurring and having a major impact on systems around the world was known and documented.

Source: The Indian Express

5. Why is single-use plastic being banned in India from July 1?

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

The Centre has banned the use of 'single-use plastic' from July 1. The Ministry for Environment, Forest and Climate Change had issued a gazette notification last year announcing the ban, and has now defined a list of items that will be banned from next month.

"The manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use of following single-use plastic, including polystyrene and expanded polystyrene, commodities shall be prohibited with effect from the 1st July, 2022," says the Ministry notification.

What is single-use plastic?

As the name suggests, it refers to plastic items that are used once and discarded. Single-use plastic has among the highest shares of plastic manufactured and used — from packaging of items, to bottles (shampoo, detergents, cosmetics), polythene bags, face masks, coffee cups, cling film, trash bags, food packaging etc.

A 2021 report by one of the Australian philanthropic organisations the Minderoo Foundation said single-use plastics account for a third of all plastic produced globally, with 98% manufactured from fossil fuels. Single-use plastic also accounts for the majority of plastic discarded – 130 million metric tonnes globally in 2019 — "all of which is burned, buried in landfills or discarded directly into the environment", the report said.

On the current trajectory of production, it has been projected that single-use plastic could account for 5-10% of greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

The report found that India features in the top 100 countries of single-use plastic waste generation – at rank 94 (the top three being Singapore, Australia and Oman. With domestic production of 11.8 million metric tonnes annually, and import of 2.9 MMT, India's net generation of single-use plastic waste is 5.6 MMT, and per capita generation is 4 kg.

What are the items being banned?

The items on which the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) have announced a ban are earbuds; balloon sticks; candy and ice-cream sticks; cutlery items including plates, cups, glasses, forks, spoons, knives, trays; sweet boxes; invitation cards; cigarette packs; PVC banners measuring under 100 microns; and polystyrene for decoration.

The Ministry had already banned polythene bags under 75 microns in September 2021, expanding the limit from the earlier 50 microns. From December, the ban will be extended to polythene bags under 120 microns. Ministry officials have explained that the ban is being introduced in phases to give manufacturers time to shift to thicker polythene bags that are easier to recycle. While



manufacturers can use the same machine for 50- and 75-micron bags, the machinery will need to be upgraded for 120 microns.

According to the Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016, there is also a complete ban on sachets using plastic material for storing, packing or selling gutkha, tobacco and pan masala.

Why these items?

Ministry officials have said that the choice for the first set of single-use plastic items for the ban was based on “difficulty of collection, and therefore recycling”.

“The enemy is not that plastic exists per se, but that plastic exists in the environment. When plastic remains in the environment for long periods of time and does not decay, it turns into microplastics – first entering our food sources and then the human body, and this is extremely harmful. We have chosen these items as they are difficult to collect, especially since most are either small, or discarded directly into the environment – like ice-cream sticks. It then becomes difficult to collect for recycling, unlike the much larger items,” said a Ministry official.

Satish Sinha of the environmental group Toxic Links described the items chosen as “low-hanging fruit”. “Of the single-use plastic industry – the production and sale of these items is miniscule. The largest share of single-use plastic is that of packaging – with as much as 95% of single use belong to this category – from toothpaste to shaving cream to frozen foods. The items chosen are of low value and of low turnover and are unlikely to have a big economic impact, which could be a contributing reason. Having said that, we do need to start with something, and it is a beginning,” said Sinha.

How will the ban be enforced?

The ban will be monitored by the CPCB from the Centre, and by the State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs) that will report to the Centre regularly. Directions have been issued at national, state and local levels — for example, to all petrochemical industries — to not supply raw materials to industries engaged in the banned items.

Directions have also been issued to SPCBs and Pollution Control Committees to modify or revoke consent to operate issued under the Air/Water Act to industries engaged in single-use plastic items. Local authorities have been directed to issue fresh commercial licenses with the condition that SUP items will not be sold on their premises, and existing commercial licences will be cancelled if they are found to be selling these items.

Last week, the CPCB issued one-time certificates to 200 manufacturers of compostable plastic and the BIS passed standards for biodegradable plastic.

Those found violating the ban can be penalised under the Environment Protection Act 1986 – which allows for imprisonment up to 5 years, or a penalty up to Rs 1 lakh, or both.

Violators can also be asked to pay Environmental Damage Compensation by the SPCB. In addition, there are municipal laws on plastic waste, with their own penal codes.

How are other countries dealing with single-use plastic?

Earlier this year, 124 countries, parties to the United Nations Environment Assembly, including India, signed a resolution to draw up an agreement which will in the future make it legally binding for the signatories to address the full life of plastics from production to disposal, to end plastic pollution.

Bangladesh became the first country to ban thin plastic bags in 2002. New Zealand became the latest country to ban plastic bags in July 2019. China issued a ban on plastic bags in 2020 with phased implementation.

As of July 2019, 68 countries have plastic bag bans with varying degrees of enforcement. Eight states in the US have banned single-use plastic bags, beginning with California in 2014. Seattle became the first major US city to ban plastic straws in 2018.

On July 2, 2021, the Directive on Single-Use Plastics took effect in the European Union (EU). The directive bans certain single-use plastics for which alternatives are available; single-use plastic plates, cutlery, straws, balloon sticks and cotton buds cannot be placed on the markets of the EU member states. The same measure applies to cups, food and beverage containers made of expanded polystyrene, and all products made of oxo-degradable plastic.

Source: The Indian Express

6. What is 'critical information infrastructure', who protects it?

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

The Union Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) has declared IT resources of ICICI Bank, HDFC Bank and UPI managing entity NPCI as 'critical information infrastructure'. The notification to this effect was issued on June 16. What is 'critical information infrastructure', and who protects it?

What is critical information infrastructure?

The Information Technology Act of 2000 defines "Critical Information Infrastructure" as a "computer resource, the incapacitation or destruction of which shall have debilitating impact on national security, economy, public health or safety".

The government, under the Act, has the power to declare any data, database, IT network or communications infrastructure as CII to protect that digital asset.

Any person who secures access or attempts to secure access to a protected system in violation of the law can be punished with a jail term of up to 10 years.

Why is CII classification and protection necessary?

World over governments have been moving with alacrity to protect their critical information infrastructure. IT resources form the backbone of countless critical operations in a country's infrastructure, and given their interconnectedness, disruptions can have a cascading effect across sectors. An information technology failure at a power grid can lead to prolonged outages crippling other sectors like healthcare, banking services.

In 2007, a wave of denial-of-service attacks, allegedly from Russian IP addresses, hit major Estonian banks, government bodies – ministries and parliament, and media outlets. It was cyber aggression of the kind that the world had not seen before, and it came in the wake of Estonia's decision to move a memorial to the Soviet Red Army to a location of less prominence. The attacks played havoc in one of the most networked countries in the world for almost three weeks.

On October 12, 2020 as India battled the pandemic, the electric grid supply to Mumbai suddenly snapped hitting the mega city's hospitals, trains and businesses. Later, a study by a US firm that looks into the use of the internet by states, claimed that this power outage could have been a cyber attack, allegedly from a China-linked group, aimed at critical infrastructure. The government, however, was quick to deny any cyber attack in Mumbai.

But the incident underlined the possibility of hostile state and non-state actors probing internet-dependent critical systems in other countries, and the necessity to fortify such assets.

How are CIIs protected in India?

Created in January 2014, the National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC) is the nodal agency for taking all measures to protect the nation's critical information infrastructure.

According to its website, NCIIPC will monitor and forecast national-level threats to CII for policy guidance, expertise sharing and situational awareness for early warning or alerts. The basic responsibility for protecting the CII system shall lie with the agency running that CII, it says.

"In the event of any threat to critical information infrastructure the National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre may call for information and give directions to the critical sectors or persons serving or having a critical impact on Critical Information Infrastructure," the NCIIPC website adds.

Source: The Indian Express

7. West Seti Hydel Project in Nepal and its importance for India

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations



What is West Seti Hydel Project?

The West Seti Dam is a proposed 750-megawatt (MW) hydroelectric dam on the Seti River in the Far-Western Development Region of Nepal. The Project will facilitate export of hydroelectricity to India. The project is envisaged to provide Nepal 31.9% electricity free. Besides, locals affected by the project are being given a share of Nepali Rs 10 million plus 30 units of electricity per month free.

The Project completion rights to India

The project was earlier accorded to a Chinese company. But Nepal feared that India won't buy power from China-executed projects.

Now, India will be constructing ambitious hydropower project in Nepal — West Seti — nearly four years after China withdrew from it, ending a six-year engagement between 2012 and 2018.

Issues in project execution

There has been some uncertainty in Nepal over India's inability to deliver projects on time. An ambitious Mahakali treaty was signed back in 1996, to produce 6,480 MW, but India has still not been able to come out with the Detailed project Report. The Upper Karnali project, for which the multinational GMR signed the contract, has made no headway for years. Major reasons for stalling of these projects was a lack of consensus over power purchase agreement with India. Also, seismic sensitivity of the Himalayan Region is the prime consideration.



Why India has been chosen?

India under PM Modi has been successful in executing the 900-MW Arun Three Project in eastern Nepal's Sankhuwa Sabha. After a standoff between Nepal and India led to the economic blockade of 2015, equations changed after Deuba took over last July, replacing Oli.

Benefits for Nepal

Nepal has a massive power shortfall as it generates only around 900 MW against an installed capacity of nearly 2,000 MW. Although it is currently selling 364 MW power to India, it has over the years importing from India.

Hurdles from Nepal's internal crisis

Nepal's Constitution has a provision under which any treaty or agreement with another country on natural resources will require Parliament's ratification by at least a two-thirds majority. That will also mean homework will be required before any hydro project is signed and given for execution.

Source: The Indian Express

