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1. Why is there a controversy around NEET this year

Why in News?

Recently, the National Testing Agency (NTA) published the results of the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test, Undergraduate (NEET UG), the competitive examination for admission to medical, dental, and AYUSH courses in government and private colleges.

The results drew immediate attention for the extraordinarily large number of candidates who got the perfect score of 720/720, and for the reason that some candidates got 718 or 719 — marks that others claimed were impossible to get in the scheme of the exam.

At least two petitions have been filed in two High Courts against the results. On June 1, a petition was filed in the Supreme Court asking that the examination be held again on the ground that the question paper had been leaked. Last month, hearing another, similar petition, the Supreme Court had declined to stay the publication of the results.

Around 2.4 million candidates took the entrance examination held on May 5 in 571 cities, 14 of which were outside India. According to the latest available data, there are a total of 1,08,940 MBBS seats in more than 700 medical colleges across the country.

Why has NEET UG 2024 been so controversial? The NTA issued a press release clarifying some of the concerns that have been raised around the examination.



The case of 67 toppers

A total 67 examinees maxed the paper, achieving All India Rank 1. There were two toppers last year, and one, three, one, and one in 2022, 2021, 2020, and 2019 respectively.

44 of the 67 toppers got the answer to a basic physics question wrong but were still given "grace marks" because an older version of the NCERT's Class 12 textbook had a mistake.

A provisional answer key released by NTA on May 29 picked the correct answer out of the choices given to the candidates, but more than 13,000 candidates challenged the key on the ground that the textbook contained information that pointed to a different answer.

An NTA official told that it had been decided to not penalise these students "since we strongly recommend all aspirants study only from NCERT textbooks for their NEET preparation".

In its press release, NTA said that the number of candidates who appeared in the 2024 exam was almost 3 lakh more than the 2023 number, and "the increase in candidates naturally led to an increase in high scorers due to a larger pool of candidates". A record 23.81 lakh students registered for NEET UG this year, significantly higher than the 20.87 lakh registrations last year, which could have contributed to the higher cutoff.

Also, according to the NTA official, the 2024 NEET was "comparatively easier" than previous years.

The 'odd' case of 718, 719

It was argued that after the maximum marks of 720, the next highest score possible was 716, and that marks of 718 and 719 did not make sense. The NTA explained in its press release that some candidates, including six of the toppers, had got "compensatory marks for loss of time". Students from a few centres in Bahadurgarh (Haryana), Delhi, and Chhattisgarh, complained that they did not get the allotted time to complete their tests, and writ petitions were filed before the High Courts of Punjab & Haryana, Delhi, and Chhattisgarh.

According to the NTA release, a "Grievance Redressal Committee consisting of eminent experts from the field of examination and academia" looked into these grievances "on the basis of factual reports of the functionaries and CCTV footages from concerned exam Centres".

Thereafter, "the loss of examination time was ascertained and such candidates were compensated with marks based on their answering efficiency and time lost, as per the mechanism/ formula established by the Hon'ble Apex Court, vide its judgment dated 13.06.2018".

According to the release, "1,563 candidates were compensated...and the revised marks of such candidates vary from – 20 to 720... Amongst these, the score of two candidates also happens to be 718 and 719 marks respectively due to compensatory marks."

'Paper leak', wrong paper

There were allegations that the question paper had been leaked in Patna. The Economic Offences Unit of Bihar Police said it had seized "admit cards, post-dated cheques, and certificates" from "members of the organised gang arrested in this case". However, while a "thorough" investigation is ongoing, the Special Investigation Team has said that the evidence collected so far is not enough to confirm a paper leak.

The NTA has "categorically denied any case of paper leak". It has said that cases have been registered against "impersonators", and "NTA has been extending support" to investigators.

NTA has, however, confirmed that in Sawai Madhopur (Rajasthan), some Hindi-medium students were mistakenly given English-medium question papers, and the examinees had responded by walking out of the examination hall taking the question paper with them.

According to the NTA, the question paper was posted on the Internet around 4 pm, but by that time the exam, which had started at 2 pm, was well underway at all other centres.

Early declaration of results

Questions have been raised over the publication of the results 10 days ahead of the scheduled date of June 14.

However, according to the NTA, the results of all its examinations are “declared at the earliest on the completion of the necessary checks in the result processing post the Answer Key challenge period”, and “the Result of NEET (UG) 2024 has been processed as per the established procedure”.

The NTA has pointed out that it “managed to declare the Results of about 23 lakh candidates within 30 days”, and “the Result of JEE (Main) 2024 Session-1 was declared in 11 days and of Session-2 (combined with Session – 1) was declared in 15 days”.

About National Testing Agency

National Testing Agency (NTA) is an autonomous agency under the Department of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education of India. It has been approved by the Union Council of Ministers and established in November 2017 to conduct entrance examinations admissions and recruitment. NTA is responsible for conducting numerous national level exams for admission and fellowship in higher educational institutions related to engineering, medical, management and pharmacy.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

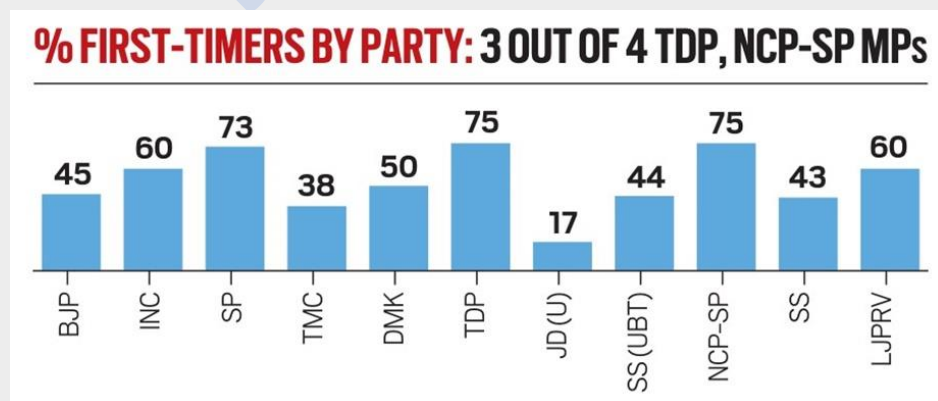
2. Charts that explain the new Lok Sabha’s average age, profession, education levels and more

Why in News?

The BJP-led National Development Alliance (NDA) emerged victorious in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, with 293 MPs elected. The opposition Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) also performed better than what various exit polls had predicted, with its 232 MPs set to become a part of the incoming 18th Lok Sabha.

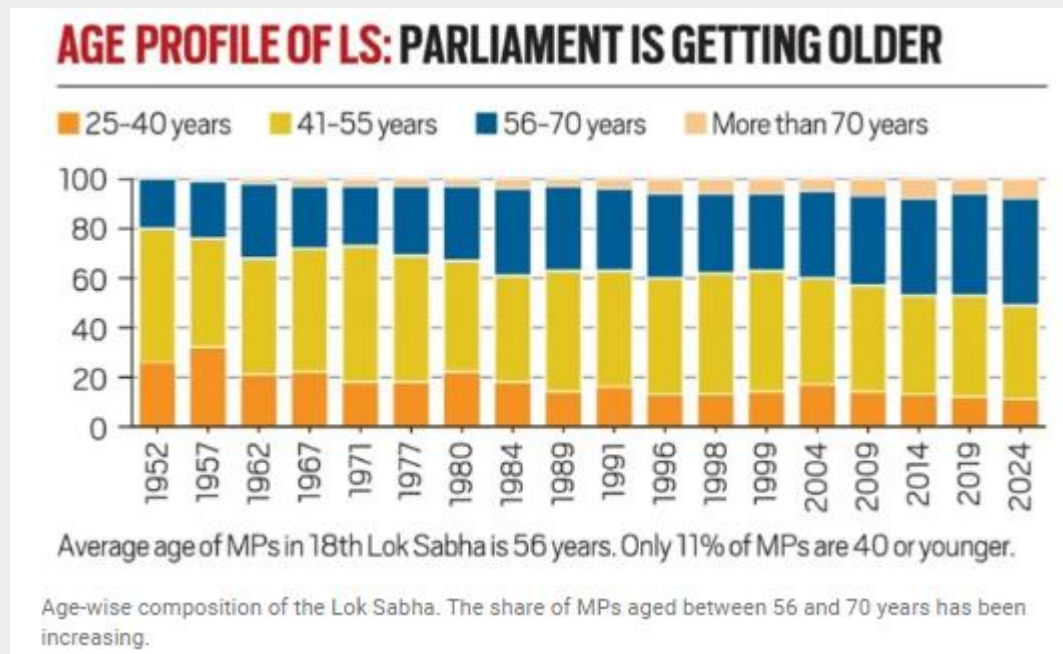
Let’s have a look at the composition of 18th Lok Sabha.

1. Which parties have the most first-time MPs?

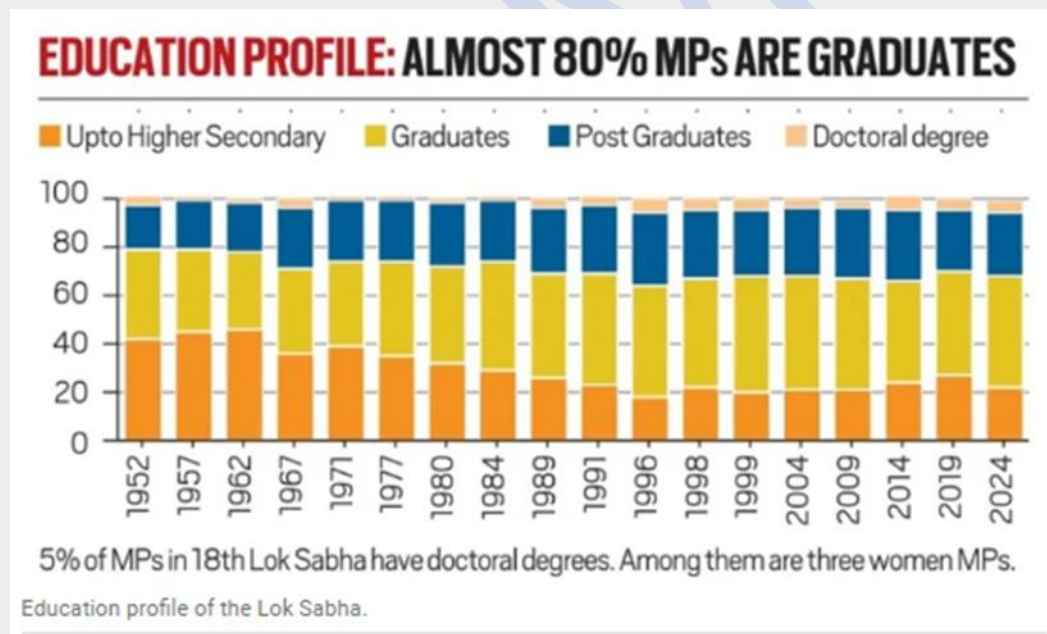


Party-wise first-time MPs (in terms of percentage).

2. What is the age profile of the 18th Lok Sabha?



3. What is the educational level of the new Lok Sabha MPs?



4. What professions are the MPs engaged in?

PROFESSIONS: FARMERS & SOCIAL WORKERS DOMINATE

Profession	% of MPs who reported
Social Work	48%
Agriculture	37%
Trade & Business	32%
Law	7%
Medicine	4%
Art & Entertainment	3%
Teaching	3%
Retired from Govt Service	2%

Candidates can report more than 1 profession in their affidavit

7% of MPs in 18th Lok Sabha are lawyers, 4% are medical practitioners.

Profession-wise composition of the Lok Sabha.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

3. Agnipath scheme, and the opposition to it

Why in News?

The Bharatiya Janata Party-led government's ambitious Agnipath scheme has faced opposition, from political parties and Armed Forces veterans alike, since it was announced in June 2022.

In fact, a key plank in INDIA bloc's campaign in states like Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan — where the Armed Forces are a sought after employer — was the opposition to this scheme for military recruitment. And the BJP's performance in these states indicates that the pitch had some resonance on the ground.

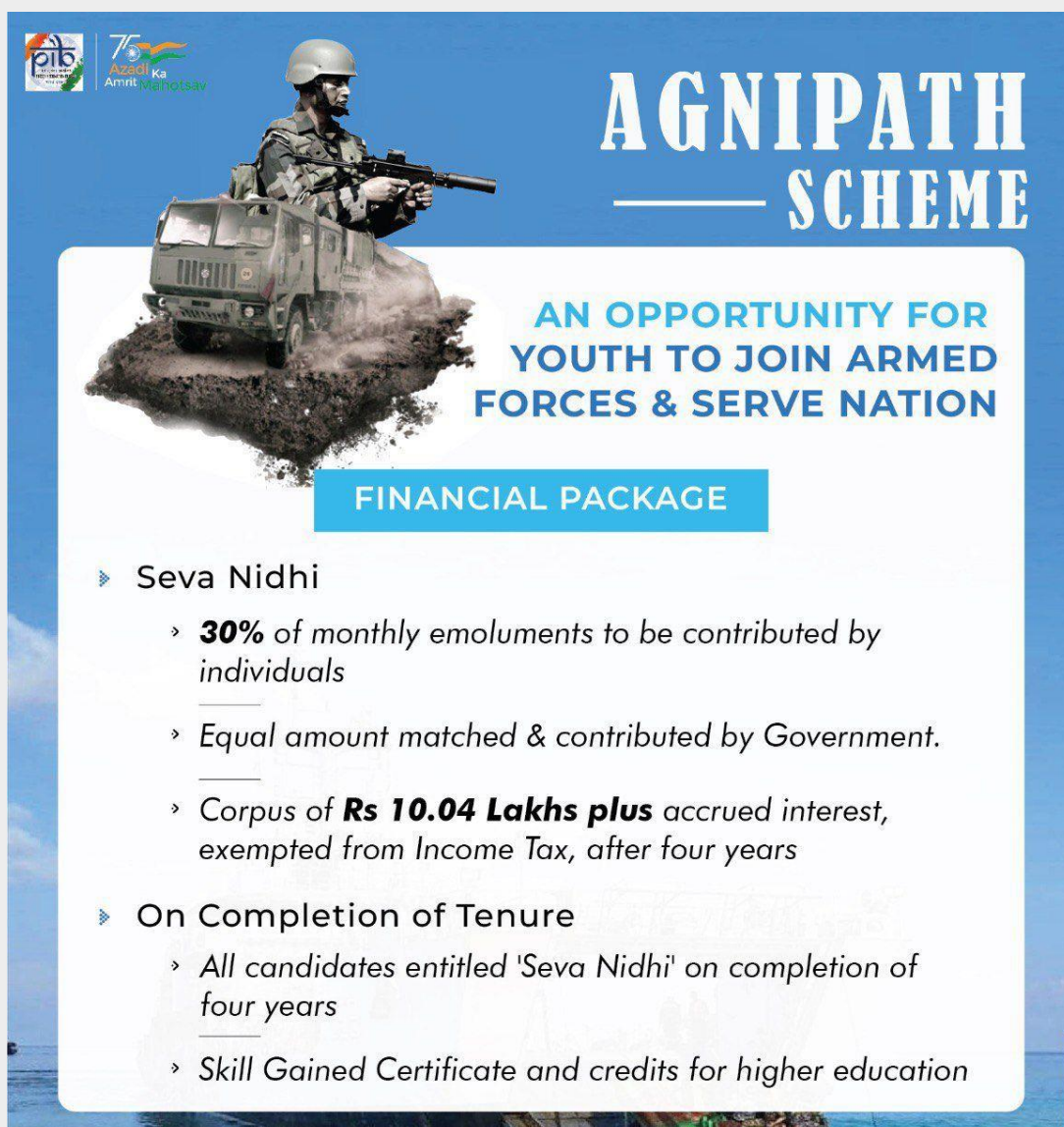
Now, with the BJP short of a majority on its own in the Lok Sabha, crucial alliance partners — Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United) and Chirag Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party — too have called for a review of the contentious scheme.

What is the Agnipath scheme?

Agnipath was aimed at recruiting personnel below officer ranks — soldiers, airmen, and sailors who are not commissioned officers — to the Indian Armed Forces for a period of four years. At the end of this tenure, upto 25% of these recruits, the so called 'Agniveers', can join the services on a permanent commission (another 15 years), subject to merit and organisational requirements.

Aspirants between the ages of 17.5 years and 23 years are eligible to apply (the upper age limit was increased from 21), and the recruitment standards remain the same as with regular service, prior to Agnipath. At present, all sailors, airmen, and soldiers, except the technical cadre of the medical branch, are recruited to the services under the scheme, which has also opened doors for the recruitment of women to the IAF and the Navy.

The scheme was announced in June 2022, after military recruitment was paused for two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic.



**AGNIPATH
SCHEME**

**AN OPPORTUNITY FOR
YOUTH TO JOIN ARMED
FORCES & SERVE NATION**

FINANCIAL PACKAGE

- ▶ **Seva Nidhi**
 - ▶ **30%** of monthly emoluments to be contributed by individuals
 - ▶ Equal amount matched & contributed by Government.
 - ▶ Corpus of **Rs 10.04 Lakhs plus** accrued interest, exempted from Income Tax, after four years
- ▶ **On Completion of Tenure**
 - ▶ All candidates entitled 'Seva Nidhi' on completion of four years
 - ▶ Skill Gained Certificate and credits for higher education

How are Agniveers compensated?

Agniveers draw a basic salary of Rs 30,000-Rs 40,000 per month, and are entitled to other risk and hardship allowances.

They contribute 30% of their monthly emoluments to the Seva Nidhi fund, which the government matches. At the end of their service, they receive approximately Rs 11.71 lakhs (with interest) as a lump sum severance package from this fund, which is exempt from income tax.

If they die on duty, their family receives a lump sum of Rs 1 crore (including the Seva Nidhi package), and full pay for the period which the soldier could not serve. In case of disability, an Agniveer can receive upto Rs 44 lakh as compensation, depending on the percentage of

disability suffered which is attributed to, or aggravated by military service. On completion of Service, they are given certificate and credits for higher education.

How is Agnipath different from regular military service?

Unlike soldiers in regular service, Agniveers do not draw pensions post-retirement. Only the 25% of Agniveers who get absorbed into the forces after four years will receive pensionary benefits, although the initial four years of service will not be considered for these.

This is the biggest change that Agnipath has brought in. Not only does the scheme will help reduce the Armed Forces' permanent force levels, this in turn will considerably cut the defence pension bill, which has been a major concern for governments for many years.

Why was Agnipath introduced?

Apart from the unsaid intention of reducing the Armed Forces' wage and pension bill, the government has argued that the scheme will ensure the forces' "youthful profile". At the time the scheme was brought in, the average age in the Armed Forces was 32 years, which Agnipath will bring down to 26 years, if implemented.

Moreover, the government has argued that after the completion of their service, Agniveers would contribute to the civil society "through their education, skill, discipline and other qualities". "This will also lead to availability of a higher-skilled workforce to the economy which will be helpful in productivity gain and overall GDP growth.

Why has Agnipath seen such strong opposition?

Critics say that the scheme creates a "lesser" cadre of soldiers, who work on the same tasks as those with full commission, but with lesser pay, benefits, and prospects.

On the ground, this disparity has caused significant disaffection among those who see military recruitment as a path to economic stability and upward mobility. Multiple parties, including the Congress, AAP, RJD, and Samajwadi Party have called for the scheme to be scrapped.

Is the government willing to roll back the scheme?

Recently, the government has indicated that it is willing to alter the scheme if required, but without compromising on the Armed Forces' youthful profile. The Forces too are carrying out an internal assessment on the impact of the scheme, based on which they will make recommendations to the government on possible changes.

All three services are learnt to have submitted their observations to the Department of Military Affairs.

How many Agniveers have been recruited so far?

In the Army, two batches of 40,000 Agniveers have completed training and are under posting. The third batch of 20,000 began training in November 2023. In the Navy, three batches of 7,385 Agniveers have completed training. In the IAF, 4,955 Agniveers have completed training.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express