

The NITI Aayog's project in Great Nicobar

(The Hindu, 26/06/24)

On June 17, the Congress party demanded an “immediate suspension” of all clearances granted to NITI Aayog’s mega project on Great Nicobar island in the light of “violations of due process, legal and constitutional provisions protecting tribal communities, and the project’s disproportionate ecological and human cost.”

Where is Great Nicobar and which are the communities living there?

- The island of Great Nicobar is the southernmost tip of India and a part of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago that comprises 600-odd islands.
- It is hilly and covered with lush rainforests that are sustained by around 3,500 mm of annual rainfall.
- The rainforests and beaches host numerous endangered and endemic species including the giant leatherback turtle, the Nicobar megapode, the Great Nicobar crane, the Nicobar crab-eating macaque, and the Nicobar tree shrew.
- It has an area of 910 sq km with mangroves and Pandan forests along its coast.
- The island is home to two tribal communities — the Shompen and the Nicobarese.
 - The Shompen, around 250 in total, mostly live in the interior forests and are relatively isolated from the rest of the population. They are predominantly hunter-gatherers and are classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group within the list of Scheduled Tribes.
 - The Great Nicobarese lived along the island’s southeast and west coast until the tsunami in 2004, after which the government resettled them in Campbell Bay. Today, there are around 450 Great Nicobarese on the island. The Nicobarese community practises farming and fishing.
- The majority on Great Nicobar comprises people who settled on the island from mainland India. Between 1968 and 1975, the Indian government settled retired military servicemen and their families here and today they number around 6000.
- Campbell Bay is also an administrative hub that includes local offices of the Andaman and Nicobar administration and the panchayat.

What is the NITI Aayog project?

- In March 2021, NITI Aayog unveiled a ₹72,000 crore plan called ‘Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island at Andaman and Nicobar Islands’.
- It includes the construction of an
 - An international transshipment port - to participate in the regional and global maritime economy by becoming a major player in cargo transshipment.
 - An international airport –to enable Great Nicobar Island to attract international and national visitors
 - A 450 MVA gas and solar-based power plant.– to support the energy needs of the developmental pathway.

- A township – for increased number of settlers.
- The government contends that its motive is to **leverage the strategic location** with the Great Nicobar Island located only **90 km away from the western tip of the Malacca Strait**, an important shipping route between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

Why is there opposition?

- The project's environmental impact is immense, with the **destruction of 130 sq km of forest land and 10 lakh trees**.
- The government's decision to **denotify two wildlife sanctuaries**(Galathea Bay wildlife sanctuary and the Megapode wildlife sanctuary) raises concerns about the dilution of environmental protection.
- The project **threatens endangered species** like the giant leatherback turtle and the Nicobar megapode, both listed in Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act.
- Lack of transparency in the environmental clearance and appraisal process **fuels public distrust**.
- The project is being pushed through **without proper consent from local tribes**, particularly the Shompen.
- The project **hinders the rehabilitation** of the Nicobarese Tribe to their ancestral lands.
- The Shompen Tribe, with **limited immunity**, is vulnerable to diseases from increased contact with outsiders due to the project.
- The project's location in a **seismically active region** raises concerns about the lack of adequate disaster risk assessment.

Agnipath Scheme

(The Hindu, 26/06/24)

The recruitment of soldiers into the armed forces as Agniveers under the Agnipath scheme has been a major issue in the recent general election.

What is the Agnipath scheme?

- The Agnipath scheme for recruitment of soldiers, sailors and airmen into the three services was announced on June 14, 2022 doing away with the earlier process of permanent recruitment.
- Under the new scheme, Agniveers are recruited for four years on the completion of which, **up to 25% would be selected** into the regular ranks on a permanent basis.
- The age bracket for new recruits was fixed at 17 and a half to 21 years of age and till 2026 the overall intake has been capped at 1.75 lakh.
- Agniveers during their tenure can get **class 12 certificates** or a Bachelor's degree in addition to other skill certificates and when leaving after four years will get a lumpsum amount but are **not eligible for pension**.

What are the benefits of the Agnipath scheme?

- Lowers the **average age** of the armed forces allowing them to learn modern skills at faster pace.
- Participants receive comprehensive training, enhancing their technical and soft skills thus **boosting post-service employability**
- Provides **lump-sum payment** enabling retirees to start their own business.
- Creates a **younger, potentially more agile military** aligning with contemporary military needs.
- By employing short-term contracts, it **reduces long-term pension liabilities** for the government

What are the concerns?

- Exacerbates **personnel shortage** in the armed forces in the 'below the officer's rank' cadres.
 - There was no recruitment during the COVID-19 period for over two and half years which created a deficiency.
 - Around 60,000 soldiers retire from the Army every year, while 40,000 are being recruited every year
 - The low conversion rate of 25% from Agniveers to regular soldiers is going to further accentuate the shortfall.
- **Compressed training** due to the short service duration.
- Such shortfall and compressed training could impact the overall effectiveness and cohesion of the military units.
- Some argue that the short-term contracts do not provide **job security** and long-term career stability for the participants
- There is a fear that the **focus on short-term enlistment** might undermine the traditional ethos and values of a career military service.
- The economic savings from reduced pension liabilities might be offset by the **costs of continuously training new recruits**.
- **Political controversy** and protests due to perceived disadvantages.

What is the current status?

- Agnipath scheme has completed two years of implementation and the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in the Defence Ministry headed by the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) has sought feedback from the forces on the scheme.
- The Navy and Air Force have submitted feedback, the **Army is still compiling** theirs.
- Broadly, recommendations include for
 - enhancing intake numbers
 - increasing the permanent recruitment from 25% to at least 50%
 - increasing the age limit for entry though the technical route from 21 to 23 years to attract enough technically qualified individuals.

Can you answer the following question?

The implementation of the Agnipath scheme has sparked widespread debate and protests. Analyze the reasons behind this public reaction and suggest measures to modify the scheme so as to balance public demand and National Security interests.