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INDIA

The youth must tread the Agnipath

June 16, 2022, 11:19 PM IST / Jagdish Batra in Cultural Inputs, India, TOI

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The newly launched 'Agnipath' scheme to induct youth in the age bracket of 17-21 into army for a period of four years, even if new, is commendable. It reflects out-of-the-box thinking that keeps in mind the security challenges before the country. To me, it is a better option than the compulsory military training for all able-bodied youth – something that has been debated earlier. While the conscription of all young people is a gigantic project requiring huge expenditure and infra set-up, this voluntary path to a short stint

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with the armed forces is practically sound and can have a lasting salubrious impact on the health of the nation.

The importance of compulsory military training has been emphasised many a times by experts. Had it not been so, it would not have been in practice in no less than 85 countries or more than half the world. There are different criteria for selection with regard to the gender and period of service that ranges from 9 months to 48 months. Countries as varied in political structure as USA, Russia, Brazil, UAE and North Korea have some kind of conscription rules. The practice underlines the idea that even a short stint in the armed forces instils a sense of discipline, inclination to do physical work and readiness to defend the country in times of need. That India faces unprecedented threat from enemy countries cannot be denied. At the same time, due to internal friction, the sense of unity and allegiance to the motherland has been relegated over the period. These issues can be addressed through provision for military service to the youth.

The odds against compulsory military training which have weighed in so far with various governments in our country include financial and infrastructural constraints for the very large number of young people even if only males are

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considered. Also, the ideological opposition on the ground of feared militarisation of society has been aired. Presently, with the release of some 35,000 battle-ready jawans every year, such a fear has been raked up, even though the Agniveers will constitute a very small proportion of army. However, the present security threats call for a more realistic approach and emphasize reviewing the traditional opposition.

The criticism by opposition parties of the provision for only four years of service has been taken up as an excuse by some youngsters in the country to indulge in violence and arson. Certainly, it disproves their eligibility for joining a disciplined force like army. Only holding aloft the Tricolor is not the sign of patriotism. The details of the Agnipath scheme that have trickled out so far indicate that after four years of service in the army, navy or air force, one-fourth of the Agniveers will be allowed (surely on some basis) to serve further with the force. Others will be helped in joining paramilitary services, CRPF, etc. and there is adequate scope over there. It is hoped that they would also get a preferential treatment in other departments related to security like police, though it being a state subject will require the concurrence of the states. Their Agniveer certificate will be the highest character certificate that will

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assure even private employers of their commitment to duty and hard work. That the government has done its homework seriously is seen from the announcement by the UGC that it will provide them higher education on priority if they choose to upgrade their skills. That will be another avenue open to them at the age of 25 when they will leave the Agnipath. The army too has been taken into confidence on this move.

The opposition parties have come out with tenuous grounds for opposing the scheme. To say that there are five million unemployed youth and the Agnipath will provide jobs only to one million does not make the present scheme redundant. Indeed it is a new type of scheme but to say that it would affect the regimental professionalism and morale is to berate the commitment of our army men. There is merit in the argument that mere six months of training will not make the youth fighting fit, but they will surely be assigned duties for which they are fit. To scrap the scheme for certain imagined fears is not a wise approach. The youth thus trained are definitely going to be an asset for the nation since they would have cultivated the sense of duty and discipline in a proven manner. In a country where most politicians are busy filling their own coffers at the expense of poor voters and armchair intellectuals keep on preaching



utopian liberty, we need youth who have their feet on the ground, and Agnipath aims to do exactly this.

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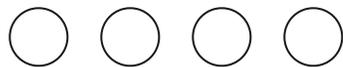
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