

Draft AIPSN Position Paper on Agnipath Scheme

*D.Raghunandan
Delhi Science Forum*

The Union Government once again made a hugely significant policy announcement, namely the Agnipath scheme for all new military recruitments, to come into effect almost instantly, with the written examinations just a few days away. In brief, the new recruitment is that all new recruits will be 17.5-21 years of age and, after due selection process, these so-called “Agniveers” will be recruited into the different Services for a period of 4.5 years, of which just 6 months will be for training. On completion of the 4 years of service, only 25% of Agniveers will be retained in service as “All India All Class” servicemen/women with all the usual benefits including pension. The remaining 75% of the Agniveers would be given a golden handshake viz. a one-time payment Rs.11.5 lakhs with no further benefits.

The announcement was made in the sudden and abrupt manner for which this Government is known, similar to the policy declarations on demonetization, GST, Covid nationwide lockdown etc. As before, there was no prior information to the public, no discussion in Parliament, and no advancement notice soliciting public opinion. The shock announcement triggered an immediate, strong and unfortunately often violent reaction all over the country from youth aspiring for military service. The section apparently most angered were youth who had been preparing themselves for now close to 3 years for the recruitment process both academically and physically, since there has been no recruitment for that period due to Covid, only to be told that a mere 25% of those selected would obtain full-service careers in the armed forces.

In the face of widespread protests, the government has, true to form, stayed adamant that it would go ahead with the scheme. The government claimed that the three service chiefs and top brass had been fully consulted and endorsed the Scheme. They were called upon to defend the Scheme in the media and in other public fora. However, given the widespread and strong criticism of the Scheme by retired top-ranked veterans, it looks as if the current Service Chiefs have unfortunately been made sacrificial goats and been dragged into a controversy over a mainly political decision.

In a tacit acknowledgement that the protesting and other critics had valid anxieties about the Scheme, the Union Government tried offering minor modifications and several vague promises aimed at lowering the temperature of the agitations and offsetting negative opinions. The one concrete concession was to raise the maximum age to 23 years, only for this year, so as to compensate for the lost Covid period. Assurances were also given that 10% of recruitment into Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) would be reserved for Agniveers, and vague promises included working out academic equivalents for skills acquired and issuing certificates, diplomas or even degrees through IGNOU and so on. But the Government has stuck to its basic policy that all future military recruitment would be through the Agnipath scheme.

Human resource restructuring needed, but Agnipath not the answer The All India Peoples Science Network (AIPSN) has deep misgivings about the Agnipath Scheme and is totally

opposed to it in its present form. As elaborated below, AIPSN understands the need for revamping the human resources, organizational structure and budget of the Armed Forces to suit contemporary realities and future requirements, especially as regards the “revolution in military affairs” (RMA). However, the Agnipath Scheme definitely does not cater to this need. On the contrary, it will adversely affect the capabilities of the Indian Armed Forces in the modern, technology-intensive military and strategic environment. In the current security situation and threat scenarios in India’s immediate neighbourhood and in the wider regional context, the Scheme endangers national security. As it stands, Agnipath will have undesirable consequences for the structure and ethos of the Armed Forces, and will also have negative social implications given the 75% Agniveers leaving the armed forces and joining the large pool of unemployed youth. Let us take a closer look at each of these aspects.

It has long been understood within the Armed Forces, and also recommended by different Expert Groups such as the Kargil Committee (1999) headed by the redoubtable security analyst K.Subrahmanyam, that the Armed Forces, especially the Army, need to be downsized and its average age brought down. This is felt necessary in keeping with the changing nature of warfare, especially the introduction of many transformative technologies such as C4 (communications, command, control, computers), network and satellite-linked systems, remotely controlled weapons, sophisticated radars and laser-guided systems etc, all calling for a young, technically trained, “lean and mean” military. To cite an example, China has in recent years reduced its military from around 3.5 million soldiers to just around 1 million, while significantly equipping it with advanced technology systems.

Reducing expenditure on wages and pensions Downsizing would also reduce the huge outlay on pensions, which has grown to huge proportions. After implementation of the One Rank One Pension (OROP) Scheme, several Pay Commission recommendations etc, the Salary expenditure of the Armed Forces is around Rs.1.536 lakh crore (\$21 bn). Pension expenditure is a whopping Rs.1.197 lakh crore (\$16.7 bn), together bringing human resource expenditure to about 52% of the total defence budget! This is roughly the same as the amount available for desperately needed capital acquisitions, new advanced platforms and to upgrade, refurbish or replace legacy equipment.

The high HR expenditures have been highlighted by the CAG and reports of various committees, notably the 15th Finance Commission which called for urgent reduction of the pension expenditure, suggesting that the Defence Forces shift to the New Pension Scheme now applicable to Government civilian employees. On their part, the Services have completely rejected this idea.

It should be underlined that pensions are not just a financial element or a perk of office, but an emotional issue that testifies to their worth to society and a clear confirmation by the State that, in recognition of service personnel risking their lives in defence of the nation, the State would support them for the rest of their lives or their families in case the worst comes to be. Simply put, military pensions should not be touched.

However, the pension expenditure of the Armed Forces, and the total HR expenditure, have undoubtedly been the prime motivations behind the Agnipath Scheme. This has never been admitted or put forward as a rationale for Agnipath by Government, which has preferred to call the Scheme as a major “reform” to bring in younger recruits and build a higher-skilled military. Other commentators, especially pro-Government retired military brass, have been less shy and have admitted the linkage.

Many commentators mistakenly argue that reduced human resource expenditures could be used to acquire modern equipment for which insufficient funds are available currently. But military budgetary allocations and expenditures are not zero-sum games. Savings on HR expenditure will come into effect much later, and modernization of the military cannot wait for that to happen, so the two need to be de-linked but take place in a synchronized, planned manner, a subject for separate discussion elsewhere.

Can expenditure savings be the only criterion by which we should assess the Armed Forces? Can one realistically expect an Agniveer in his 3rd year of service to risk his life knowing that he may be asked to leave the Service after a year, with no pension or benefits? As pointed out by recently retired veterans, the Scheme will make the Indian military risk-averse, which is the last thing one wants. Even if the Government does save considerable money by reducing pensions and salaries out of the Armed Forces, will this offset the many other negatives of the Agnipath Scheme? Let us discuss these.

Dangerous downsizing, poor skilling and class divisions Let us first assess the reduction of total strength, taking the Army as an example, since the Army has a strength of around 12.5 lakhs against a total of about 15 lakhs for all the Services. It should be noted that there has been no recruitment during the past 3 years, and there has been no announcement of whether this shortfall of almost 2 lakhs would be made up subsequently, since the recruitment announced for this year is the same 65,000 as usual. Detailed [calculations](#) by a retired Lt. General has shown that, by 2030, taking into account recruitments, retention of Agniveers and routine retirements, the total strength of the Army would have fallen quite dramatically. The number of 4-year Agniveers would be in a 45:55 ratio to more experienced soldiers in service, and will worsen after that. However, at the unit level of Infantry or Artillery with a nominal strength of 500, an “experience inversion” would have started, and there would be 68 Agniveers to 32 experienced soldiers and, by 2034, would have only 18 soldiers with longer service than Agniveers! The point is that the Army may indeed be getting smaller, and with a younger average age, but it will also soon have a long and inexperienced tail, with less experience, technical knowledge and skill than required for a technologically advanced military.

Will the training of the Agniveers get more technical, with more advanced knowledge and skill levels, given the more high-tech equipment the military will have, especially in the Air Force and Navy? The entry level qualifications are the same as before i.e. 10th Std or 10+2. As senior veterans have pointed out, even in the Army, a soldier can be said to be fully ready only after about 4 years, by which time the new Scheme would send home 75% of recruits and start training all over again. In the more technically demanding Air Force and Navy it takes 6 years or more of on-job training, which Agnipath will not allow. Indeed, keeping this aspect in mind, the US military has recently *increased* the recruitment age, with the argument that it requires more qualified, experienced and mature recruits for the increasingly technologically advanced military. There are therefore serious doubts whether the Agnipath Scheme meets the needs of a technologically advanced military. Rather, it is a half-baked scheme aimed chiefly at reducing the salary and pensions bill. If so, we may reasonably conclude that the Agnipath Scheme will weaken the military and stand in the way of the required technological and human resource transformation.

Many retired veterans and other experts have suggested that there are several alternative methods to reach the desired goals. A gradually reducing recruitment batch, but with longer basic service of not less than 7-10 years, with intensive training and education, and suitable severance package, or continuance in service, as desired by the recruit. The shortage of officers in

operational roles is also well-known, leaving serious leadership gaps in a technology-intensive service. Ironically, over-staffing in non-combat units and a poor “teeth-to-tail” ratio (according to some studies half that of Pakistan and one-fifth that of China), is a related and important HR issue not addressed by the Agnipath scheme. Such well-trained officers and JCOs/NCOs can effectively be rotated between fighting units, command and control centres, training establishments etc to ensure full-colour service of all recruits in an overall military of reduced strength. A stage-wise implementation of such HR plans, along with speedy modernization and induction of advanced equipment will lead to the desired “lean and mean” military with a reduced HR strength, obviating the need to tinker with traditional and well-established pension and other benefit Schemes.

False promises and adverse social impact In the wake of the explosive protests, empty promises were made to 75% of Agniveers recruited who would leave the Military each year after 4.5 years of service. Government said CAFs would reserve 10% of jobs for Agniveers, which is just a case of “robbing Peter to pay Paul” i.e. giving Agniveers these jobs while depriving youth who couldn’t get into the military. Various other Government spokespersons made similar promises on behalf of PSUs and some corporate leaders also promised to absorb Agniveers because they would be well-trained and disciplined. The reality is extremely disappointing and telling.

As per rules, there is 10% reservation of Group C jobs in Union Government and 20% in Group D, the lowest category. Reservation is 14.5% in Group C and 24.5% in Group D, in PSU Banks, CPSUs and CAPFs units and CAPFs. [Records show](#) that there were only 13,976 (1.3%) ex-servicemen out of 10,84,705 Group C employees and only 8,642 (2.7%) ex-servicemen out of 3,25,265 Group D employees in the Union Government. In Central PSUs, corresponding figures are 1.15% in Group C and 0.3% in Group D (in 94 out of 170 CPSUs which submitted data). These figures show that, for whatever reason, government departments, CPSUs etc find it difficult to attract or absorb or retain ex-servicemen at this level. Most Agniveers exiting the military after 4.5 years would not even have a graduation degree or equivalent, except for a few from the technical branches of the services for whom suitable diplomas or equivalent qualifications may be designed and given. They would have some technical skills, but perhaps too specialized in a few weapons systems to be of use in general technical environments.

The lofty promises by corporate honchos must be taken with lots of salt. Let any corporate house declare the percentage of ex-servicemen in their companies, and that would expose the reality.

It is therefore highly likely that the un-absorbed Agniveers will simply add to the vast army of the unemployed in India and constitute a potentially explosive cohort of unemployed but militarily trained youth.

Several veterans have also pointed to the dangers of militarization of society that could be posed by thousands of unemployed and frustrated Agniveers who were not absorbed into the Services after 4 years. This militarization could take many forms, such as these youth joining criminal gangs, militant formations of castes, extremist outfits or even political parties. A big worry is the burgeoning phenomenon of private military contractors (PMC) or mercenaries at the international level where even powerful nation-states are sub-contracting military work to PMCs. Since there are very few legal training facilities, former military personnel are obviously preferred for such services. Frustrated Agniveers, even if young and junior, would make ideal candidates for such recruitment.

Another aspect which has mostly ignored is the social disruption the Agniveers will cause *within* the military. It may be recalled that the Scheme says Agniveers call for recruitment as “all-India all-class” personnel, with a distinctive uniform and insignia. Many senior veterans have said categorically that, for the 4 years of “Tour of Duty” service, as well as after absorption for 15-17 years if these features also carry over to that period, having two classes of soldiers in the same unit with separate uniforms and insignia, will prove highly disruptive of unity and sense of oneness. In the first 4 years, Agniveers will likely be sneered at for being only temporary guests, and the 25% who are retained will be marked out for being some elite cadre different from all others.

It should also be noted that the Indian Army is organized in regiments distinguished by region, caste, ethnicity such as the Mahars, Jats, Sikhs, Gorkhas etc. This is undoubtedly due to India’s colonial past, and especially due to the flawed British understanding of “martial races or castes.” It is partly true that this organizational system was continued after Independence too because of the continuing semi-feudal conditions and social traditions especially in rural areas. At the same time, it should be realized that these conditions and traditions are a reality. Most veterans and serving officers feel that the prevailing regimental ethos, with mostly common background, language, food, customs etc fosters unity and bonding. Agniveers as an “all-India all-class” of soldiers will again be disruptive of the “naam, namak, nishaan” (honour, loyalty, identity) regimental ethos of the Army.

It also deserves mention, as expressed many times by protestors during their agitation against the Scheme, that the very idea of 75% of them being sent back to their villages would bring dishonor to them and their families in contrast to the honour and prestige that military service would have brought. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, pension is not just about money but about societal recognition of the ultimate sacrifice that a soldier is prepared to make.

Conclusion The Agnipath scheme is wholly ill-conceived. It puts saving some money on pensions and salaries above all else, even at the risk of undermining the strength and capabilities of the military. Agnipath stands to ruin the ethos of the Indian armed forces based on honour and commensurate benefits for service –men/women and their families. Just when the military is embarking on badly needed modernization with new equipment and platforms representing the revolution in military affairs (RMA), and when the human resources of the military require to be suitably restructures perhaps including downsizing, Agnipath moves in the opposite direction by prematurely sending home 75% Agniveers after only 4 years of service, utterly inadequate for the task at hand. Agnipath also threatens social cohesion both inside the military and in society at large, with the risk of adding thousands of militarily trained, frustrated and unemployed youth with poor future prospects. The Scheme has been thrust on the military and the nation overnight without prior discussion with senior military veterans, defence and strategic experts and, above all, with no discussions in Parliament. The Agnipath Scheme needs to be scrapped in its entirety and the various needs of reorganizing the Indian military need to be thought through with the widest possible consultation with all stakeholders, chiefly the Indian people.