

Agnipath: The Scheme and its Issues

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Summary

The Indian government recently announced a new scheme for recruitment into the armed forces. The 'Agnipath' or 'Tour of Duty' is designed to reduce the median age of the three services and restrain the burgeoning pension bill. The sudden introduction of the scheme seems to have upset the expectations of those preparing for recruitment as per the earlier pattern. Protests have induced certain relaxations by the government. The new recruitment process has commenced. While the new scheme is a step in the right direction, it is felt that the government did not undertake adequate consultation before introducing a fairly radical reform.

Introduction

In June 2022, the Indian government announced a new recruitment scheme for the armed forces. The scheme, termed *Agnipath* or 'Tour of Duty', will henceforth be the only mode of recruitment for all the three wings of the Indian armed forces at the soldier, airman and sailor levels.

The Scheme in Brief

The scheme envisages enlisting youths between 17.5 years and 21 years of age. To be known as *Agniveers* (youths selected for officer category), the recruits will have a service tenure of only four years. At the expiry of their contract, 25 per cent of them will be re-enlisted for regular military service. Designed on the lines of recruitment in many other countries where a short-term enlistment system exists, it is considered the best practice for maintaining a youthful and agile army.

The monthly salary of *Agniveers* will be around ₹30,000 (S\$520) in the first year, increasing to ₹60,000 (S\$1,050) in the fourth year. At the end of his four-year tenure, the retiring soldier will be eligible for a terminal benefit of ₹1 million to ₹1.2 million (S\$17,520 to S\$21,000), half of which would be contributed by him from his pay in monthly instalments. These short-term soldiers will also be offered a contributory severance package besides non-contributory death and disability compensation. The significant part of the scheme which has come up for adverse notice is that these recruits will not be eligible for pension or gratuity. To make the scheme more attractive, the government has offered a three-year degree programme to these enlistees to make them employable once out of service. It has also been decided to reserve 10 per cent of vacancies in the central armed police forces (CAPFs) and the Assam rifles to *Agniveers* and to earmark 10 per cent of vacancies in the coast guard, defence civilian jobs and in the defence public sector undertakings, provided they meet the eligibility criteria. The government also announced a three-year age relaxation beyond the prescribed upper age limit for *Agniveers* for recruitment in the CAPFs

and Assam rifles. The upper age limit for the CAPFs – inclusive of the Border Security Force, Central Reserve Police Force, Central Industrial Security Force, Indo-Tibetan Border Police, Sashastra Seema Bal, National Security Guard and Special Protection Group – will now stand at 26 years for *Agniveers*, as against the prescribed 23 years for general candidates.

Deferring to some protests, as recruitment to the forces had not taken place in the last two years owing to COVID-19, the upper limit for recruitment which has been pegged at 21 years, has been relaxed to 23 years for this year.

Benefits of the Scheme as Projected by the Government

The government has projected the scheme to be a ‘transformational’ initiative designed to make the forces leaner and much younger, with the average age of the soldier being brought down to about 25 from the current 32 years. Though not explicitly stated by the government, the scheme will ensure the availability of a larger share of budget outlay for capital expenditure to acquire high technology equipment and platforms because the outlay for pension will drop considerably over time.

Another objective of this scheme is that military training at a young age would make these men returning to the civilian world more disciplined and employable. It is expected that about 46,000 youths will be recruited under this scheme in the first year. The number of *Agniveers* to be recruited in the first year would only make up three per cent of the armed forces. Further, it is assessed that the performance of the *Agniveers* will be tested before re-induction in the army after the initial four years, thereby providing the forces with tried and tested personnel for supervisory ranks.

Perceived Demerits of the Scheme

While the *Agnipath* has been designed to transform the armed forces into a young and leaner force, it has met with widespread criticism for its unstated objective of saving 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 that it will impair the unit’s cohesiveness as the soldier on a short-term contract would not have the same dedication and devotion to the nation or duty as the present-day recruit who gets to serve for about 15 to 20 years and retires with a life-long pension, assured free medical support and canteen facilities.

The high pension liability appears to have compelled the government to architecture the new scheme, which it seems to have done after studying the recruitment patterns in the western countries and Israel. The government is indeed faced with a burgeoning pension bill. In the defence outlay of 2021-22, an amount of ₹1.2 trillion (\$20.96 billion) was budgeted for pensions. This outlay, huge by any standard, and more than 25 per cent of the total outlay, is also more than the budgeted amount for capital assets. This had led to a consistent and justified outcry to limit the expenditure on pensions.

On the other hand, it is argued that it would be unfair to the recruit since he would be devoid of an employment guarantee at the expiry of four years. He would still be in his twenties without the skillsets or credentials required to succeed in the civilian/corporate world. This prospect would be very demoralising.

The main weakness of the scheme, as made out by a substantial number of armed forces veterans, is that a mere six-month training for a soldier, especially to prepare him for an increasingly high technology environment, would be thoroughly inadequate. Also, within the limited span of four years, he would not be able to fuse into the deeply ingrained patriotic fervour that a soldier imbibes and, thereby, lack devotion to the nation. Considering that most of the recruits would seek alternative employment after the four-year tenure, his commitment to the task at hand would not be total. This would adversely affect the morale of the force and thereby seriously impinge on the Army's combat effectiveness.

Public Reaction

The scheme has evoked strong adverse sentiments. It is maintained that inadequate consultation with the stakeholders led to a faulty architecture of the scheme. The armed forces have not had any recruitment over the last two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Potential recruits had spent the last two years preparing for an examination for recruitment to a life-long career in the army. They were suddenly faced with a scheme that offered them only a four-year tenure sans the guaranteed prerequisites associated with the forces. This led to a huge dip in their aspirations leading to frustration. It is alleged that this frustration was fanned by the coaching institutions which these aspirants were attending to prepare themselves for the recruitment examination. There have also been suggestions that certain political parties, opposed to the government, have instigated the frustrated elements and misled them about the scheme's benefits.

Such confusing signals and inadequate timely positive communication from the government led impressionable minds of the aspirants, who were already demoralised by the ongoing pandemic, to resort to violent agitation. It was only after much adverse publicity had gained momentum that the government reacted with the chiefs of the three services going public about the benefits of the new scheme. Some piecemeal announcements about the relaxation in the upper age for the initial recruitment, setting aside a certain proportion of seats in central paramilitary forces for those exiting as *Agniveers* after their four-year tenure and having defence public sector enterprises announce priority in recruitment to these recruits, were made.

Claims of Inadequate Stakeholder Consultation before Policy Formulation

It needs to be appreciated that the Indian armed forces can no longer afford to retain mere semi-skilled foot soldiers in a modern-day warfare environment which requires technological skills in cyber warfare, handling drones, using artificial intelligence and operating specialised military equipment. A major reorientation of the present human resource assets of the forces is called for. It is towards this goal that the *Agnipath* scheme appears to be designed. Thus, minor rehashing of the scheme to make it more attractive

without altering its fundamental goals, would go a long way in its acceptability among aspirants.

A prior discussion of the proposal in parliament or even in the public domain may have smoothened the introduction process with minor tweaking based on the feedback that the government would have received. The secrecy behind its formulation and the surprise element in the announcement seem to have shattered the expectations of the youths who were barely emerging out of the scenario of reduced employment opportunities over the last two to three years. It needs to be appreciated that projecting the armed forces to generate employment opportunities for the youths in India will be a fallacious step. Any radical yet much-needed reform policy needs to be socialised among the public/youths, especially since there has been a dwindling of government employment opportunities over the last two to three years.

The financial burden on the government of an 'assured benefit' pension scheme is becoming unsustainable. This fact compelled the introduction of a 'defined contribution' scheme of pension for all civilian government employees in 2005. However, the 'new pension scheme' (NPS), as it is called, had not been made applicable to defence employees. The subsequent introduction of the 'one rank-one pension' scheme for defence employees has added to the exponentially burgeoning pension bill of the armed forces necessitated a rethink, leading to the *Agnipath*. It is thus high time that the government ensured a roadmap by which the pension bill gradually declines such that more funds are released for high-technology equipment and more skilled human resources in the forces. It will be a win-win situation for the police and paramilitary forces on one side and the *Agniveers* on the other if the highly trained manpower, which will be released from the armed forces after serving for four years, has a smooth segue into the other para-military forces. This will ensure that the para – military forces will get trained manpower and will not need to spend time and resources in de novo training for them. All it may require is a minor tweaking to enable specialisation in the force to which they are subsequently assigned. Such reform may meet with resistance from vested interests of each service but there is a need to have an integrated approach rather than have each force operating in parallel silos. This calls for a comprehensive roadmap weaving all forces into an integrated human resource policy rather than providing piece-meal relaxations being induced by the agitators and other pressure groups.

Conclusion

The Army, Air Force and Navy have announced their various recruitment dates for *Agniveers*. The announcement seems to have reduced heightened emotions and diverted the attention of the youths from the agitation path they had resorted to. However, the recent experience of the government facing violent agitation for recruitment to the railways, forcing a hasty withdrawal, does point to inadequate preparation and sensitising of the stakeholders while contemplating sweeping changes. Similarly, the violence that followed the announcement of the *Agnipath* scheme was largely due to the fact that the youths, who were training to appear for recruitment in the forces for over two years, suddenly learnt that the scheme for which they had trained was no longer available. Their disappointment was palpable. To be suddenly informed upon joining the army that they would merely be on contract for only four years and then without any pensionary benefit

and be on the road looking for jobs must have come as a rude shock destabilising their aspirations. While the government has clarified that the scheme was under discussion over the last two years and has been well thought out, the fact that army veterans and other stakeholders did not have any exposure to it does indicate a limited consultation. A more comprehensive consultation would have ensured a 'smoother landing' with the youths being prepared for what was in store and, hence, having a more positive attitude towards it.

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