

ANALYZING THE AGNIPATH MODEL OF INDIAN ARMY'S MODERNIZATION PROGRAM

By
Mahwish Hafeez
Research Fellow
&
Muhammad Ijlal Azam
Intern
India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Edited by
Dr Arshad Ali

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



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The Agnipath model, introduced by Modi government on June 14, 2022² with the proclaimed intention of inducing efficiency in the personnel pay and pensions, is a subject of intense debate and conflict among different sections of Indian society. The project on one hand is being lauded as a novel project that aims at reducing soldiers' average age and expenditures to make financial space for defense equipment procurement. On the other hand, the fears of financial insecurities of the scheme among the army personnel and its demoralization effect on the army, the apprehensions of this scheme developing an inexperienced army, dissatisfaction among aspirants for the army, and a host of other problems have led to a massive uproar throughout the country.³

The agnipath scheme is a government scheme for the induction of recruits i.e.

- 1 Kallol Bhattacharjee, "India to Give Land for I2U2-Backed Food Parks," *The Hindu*, July 14, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/positive-agenda-prime-minister-narendra-modi-addresses-first-i2u2-summit-virtually/article65639365.ece>.
- 2 "Bharat ke Agniveer': Centre unveils new defence recruitment model | 10 points," *Hindustan Times*, June 14, 2022,
- 3 "Agnipath : One dead in violent India protests over military hiring," *BBC News*, June 17, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-61841268>

Agniveers (fire-brave)⁴ in its army, navy, and air force branches of the military. According to this scheme, citizens of India aged 17.5-21 years of age could apply for the army. However, following massive protests that erupted across India against the scheme, the age limit for this year has been relaxed for 2 years, increasing the upper age limit to 23 years.⁵ The cadres inducted through this scheme would serve for 4 years, including 6 months of training, and retire after that period without any pension or allowances. Nonetheless, they will receive a one-time payment of around 11.7 lac Indian rupees. There would also be a chance for the cadres joining the permanent ranks of army but they would not account for more than 25% of the total batch strength. One induction batch would consist of 45000-50000 individuals and there would be two batches of induction during a given year⁶.

The scheme is a product of years of planning and deliberations by the military institution working to put a ceiling on the rising expenses of military cadres working under the preview of the 17 years minimum service rules and the one rank one pension' policy developed by the army in the past decades. The need for reduction of finances in this sector was further realized after the Indian skirmishes with Pakistan and China during the India-Pakistan standoff (2019) and India-China skirmishes (2020) respectively, exposing the obsolescence of Indian equipment for combat purposes with its adversaries, forcing India to revamp its military modernization program and hence expenditures for modern military equipment⁷, instigating the institutions to slash expenditures in pay and wages sections⁸, and Agnipath scheme is a plausible manifestation of this.

However, simple as it seems, the concept of such a model is still fraught with dangers. As pointed out by multiple military experts, this scheme would strike the very heart of the structure of the army. This would be due to an inherent potential for a range of adverse implications of the policy on the aspects of induction, morale, and battle-hardiness of the army. Chief among the concerns associated with the scheme is the detrimental aspect it would have on the induction of new cadres in the field. With the perks of permanent jobs with pensions and allowances being the chief perks

⁴ Sushant Singh, "Analysis : New India army plan may have 'devastating consequences', AlJazeera, June 16, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/16/analysis-new-india-army-plan-may-have-devastating-consequences>

⁵ "Centre brings major change in Agnipath scheme amid nationwide protests, raises age limit to 23 from 21," *India.Com*, June 17, 2022, <https://www.india.com/news/india/breaking-centre-raises-agnipath-scheme-age-limit-for-first-year-to-23-from-21-amid-nationwide-protests-5457962/>

⁶ "What is Agnipath scheme, who all can apply? Check eligibility, salary and other details," *Economic Times*, June 17, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/what-is-the-agnipath-scheme-who-all-can-applyall-you-need-to-know/articleshow/92225306.cms>

⁷ "How India is ramping up efforts to bolster military capability," *Dw*, May 1, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-india-is-ramping-up-efforts-to-bolster-military-capability/a-60336292>

⁸ Laxman Kumar Behera, "Agnipath: A bold, new defence recruitment scheme," *Observer Research Foundation*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/a-bold-new-defence-recruitment-scheme/>

for induction into the army, the absence of such stimuli could affect the number of aspirants wishing to enter the service, given the fact that group 'A' servicemen enjoy significant privileges over their armed counterparts, like faster promotions, pension benefits, receiving 45% of defence pension bill and receiving five time more funds than the average soldier⁹. This could negatively impact the quality of troops in the future.

In addition, it is feared that the scheme could compromise the working of the military institution by reducing the morale of the military. The traditional concept of military service revolved around the virtues of honor and chivalry, something which is clearly lacking in this 'corporate type' military scheme, which could damage professionalism among the ranks of the army. The base of the army's organization has traditionally been the regimental system where a soldier focuses on the slogan of honour, loyalty, and identity and proudly associates himself with his regiment over a period of time - something which this system of "transitory"¹⁰ employment seems to eradicate. And then there is the aspect of 20% retention of army cadres for the jobs that would result in extreme competition among soldiers, potentially leading to tense relations amongst soldiers.

Experience among the army personnel is another aspect where this scheme is threatening to undermine the military capabilities of the institution. Being set as the only mode of induction of military cadres below the rank of officers, the Agniveers are set to dominate the ranks of the army by 2032.¹¹

⁹ "Agniveer: An army veteran's detailed argument against Agnipath scheme- part 1," *Financial Express*, June 21, 2022, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/agniveer-an-army-veterans-detailed-argument-against-agni-path-scheme-part-1/2566452/>

¹⁰ "Why senior veterans of Armed Forces are worried about Agnipath," *Countercurrents.org*, July 26, 2022, <https://countercurrents.org/2022/07/why-senior-veterans-of-armed-forces-are-worried-about-agnipath/>

¹¹ "Agniveers will be 50% of Army by 2032: Vice-chief Lt-General BS Raju," *Times of India*, June 16, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/agniveers-will-be-50-of-army-by-2032-vice-chief-lt-general-bs-raj/articleshow/92239322.cms>

Table 1. The experience ratio of Army

Detail	Strengths	2026 75:25		2030 55:45		2034 46:54	
		Experienced soldiers	Agniveers	Experienced soldiers	Agniveers	Experienced soldiers	Agniveers
Roster Strength of Unit	500	375	125	275	225	230	270
Extra Regimental Duties (10%)	50	50	-	50	-	50	-
Effective Unit strength	450	325	125	225	225	180	270
HQs & Specialists	120	120	-	120	-	120	-
Residual Strengths in Fighting Sub Units(3)	330	205	125	105	225	60	270
Composition of a Sub Unit	110	69	41	35	75	20	90
Experience Ratio at Fighting Subunits		62	38	32	68	18	72
		1.63	1	1	2.1	1	3.5

Source: “Agnipath:The kindergarten mathematics,” Financial Express, June 26, 2022, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/agnipath-the-kindergarten-mathematics/2573285/>

Now, by the very nature of the system, most of the Agniveers would have a very short military experience. This would put them at a disadvantage against any significantly experienced armies in combat. On top of that, there is also the concern for the short training period of the soldiers (6 months), which might prove insufficient for their role.

Those opposing the scheme highlight the issue of reemployment of the soldiers retiring after their four year’s tenure. The government has already announced measures for this aspect including a quota for Agniveers for various government posts. However, this is easier said than done. The government has, up till now, failed in fulfilling its targets of reemployment for retired military men.¹² Therefore, it would indeed be an uphill task for them to accommodate the additional vast numbers of soldiers through this scheme. This would be especially alarming for the state, given that the retired persons would have received military training and experience, with the potential to present a serious threat to the state should they become embroiled in criminal activities.

Finally, it is also feared that the real motive of the Modi government is to destroy ethnic diversity of the army and instead make it a nationalist army following the example armies that were created in

¹² “Agnipath Scheme: Data shows veterans fail to find govt jobs after retirement,” Business Standard, June 21, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/agnipath-data-shows-veterans-fail-to-find-govt-jobs-after-retirement-122062000279_1.html

the 18th and 19th centuries after merging the ethno-national 'regions' identities that existed in Europe¹³.

Hence, it is no surprise that as soon as the scheme was announced, people, particularly the youth of the country were out on the roads denouncing the scheme. States including Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Telangana, Odisha, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Jharkhand and Assam saw protesters setting trains and vehicles on fire and damaging public and private property. Two persons lost their lives whereas 13 people got injured during these protests.¹⁴

Although the Agnipath scheme was designed to increase the latent power of the army as well as inducing efficiency in the military structure against the rising costs of defense expenditures, the reservations against the move propose its failure. It will only increase insecurity among the youth aspiring to become soldiers regarding their future which in turn will have a potential greater risk of trained cadres falling into the hands of criminal/terrorist groups. Such a scenario will pose a big challenge not only for India but the entire region as well.

¹³ Prem Shankar Jha, "The Agnipath scheme may be designed to ring the death knell of Indian democracy," *The Wire*, July 16, 2022, <https://thewire.in/security/agnipath-scheme-death-knell-indian-democracy-hindu-rashtra>

¹⁴ "As Agnipath protests claim 2 lives, Rajnath & military chiefs say job drive will start in a few days," *Times of India*, June 18, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/as-agnipath-protests-claim-2-lives-rajnath-military-chiefs-say-job-drive-will-start-in-a-few-days/articleshow/92289807.cms>