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## The Message from Agnipath: India Can't Afford the Military it Needs

By: Sushant Singh

*The signals that the Agnipath scheme sends to India's adversaries is that under the current dispensation India is unable to provide for the armed forces what the country needs to meet its strategic aims.*

The fires marking the protests against the new short-term contractual recruitment scheme for soldiers of the armed forces may have subsided on the streets across India but they continue to simmer in the hearts and minds of youth. The Agnipath scheme, as it has been christened by the government, will henceforth be the only way of recruiting soldiers into the Indian armed forces, who will serve for four years in the rank of Agniveer with a distinct insignia and different terms of service.

### The scheme

To recapitulate, every Agniveer will be demobilised after four years in uniform, and up to a quarter of them may be taken back in service to start afresh as soldiers. The short-term contract entails no gratuity, pension, medical cover, canteen facilities, or even ex-serviceman status after demobilisation. The promise of reservations in central armed police forces or preferential employment in state police or corporate jobs does not hold much water considering the record of these organisations in employing ex-servicemen. Rather unattractive in perks, privilege, and social status, the Agnipath scheme is exploitative. It banks on benefitting from high rates of unemployment and underemployment in the country. However, it is bound to bring a career in the military a few notches down in the priority list for rural youth.

The scheme also envisages two other changes, which have largely escaped the attention of the public. It does away with class-based recruitment – a euphemism for recruitment based on sub-castes – for older units and sub-units of the Indian Army. The upturning of the recruitment model of more than 250 years in favour of a so-called national army alters the character, nature and ethos of an institution that seamlessly transited from the East India Company to the British Crown to independent India. Prima facie, creating a national army should be a welcome move. But the type of nationalism espoused by the Hindutva ideology currently ruling India raises serious questions about this shift. The preparation undertaken by the organisation to face this upheaval seems minimal, adding to the apprehensions about transiting to the new scheme.

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The second significant change is in doing away with the state-wise targets for recruitment into the Army. Based on the 'recruitable male population' of each state, this policy was implemented in the 1960s to prevent any linguistic, regional, or ethnic imbalance in the army of a multi-faith and multi-lingual country. Discarding the policy brings the danger of creating an army dominated by one region, religion, or language, undoing one of the many steps undertaken in independent India to prevent military coups and dysfunctional civil-military relations as witnessed in Pakistan. An imbalanced army puts civil-military relations under undue stress, even as academic research warns of a greater risk of civil war in a multi-ethnic society.

### Running the risks

The risks are more direct for the efficiency and effectiveness of the armed forces, where a four-year term that includes a training period is considered too short to use a young man as a proficient soldier. Most veterans agree that seven years, which until the 1960s used to be the period of 'colour service' – the minimum number of years a soldier is bound to serve before retirement – is the minimum for optimally utilising young soldiers. As anything above five years of service would have led to the payment of gratuity and grant of ex-servicemen status, the government has ruled those out by limiting the Agniveer's tour of duty to four years. The armed forces will eventually be split halfway through the middle, with 50% short-term contracted young men and the rest regular soldiers. In a move that would save money for the government but further penalise the 25% of Agniveers selected for regular military service after demobilisation, their first four years of soldiering will not be counted towards service, basic service salary, or pensions.

None of the political rhetoric employed by the government, its chosen band of serving and retired military officers, or right-wing commentators can hide the unpleasant fact that the only reason for undertaking this move is monetary. Out of the total allocation of Rs 5.25 lakh crore for the defence ministry in 2022–23, Rs 1.19 lakh crore alone is budgeted for pensions. This amount has shot up substantially after implementing the One Rank One Pension scheme in 2015, as per Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s election campaign promise from 2013, and the Seventh Pay Commission recommendations. Between 2011 and 2021, the bill for defence pensions went up by an average of 15.7% yearly, while the overall defence budget grew only at 9.6%. Taken together, salaries and pensions now consume more than half the allocation of the defence ministry.

### Financial reasons

The alarm bells had started ringing in the government a few years ago, leading it to amend the terms of reference of the Fifteenth Finance Commission to find a way to provide for defence and internal security expenses. The commission’s final report was categorical in stating that the current model of pensions and salaries for defence personnel was unsustainable and needed a specific plan to reduce outlays. It made certain recommendations to provide greater resources for modernising the armed forces. Still, it did not venture to suggest an idea as dangerous as this plan for short-term contractual recruitment of soldiers.

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A nationalist government that actively cultivates its muscular image as a supporter of the military – with Modi dressing up in military uniform and claiming military’s successes as his personal achievements – did not accept those recommendations. Accepting them would have destroyed the narrative of a government that projects itself as an unabashed and uncritical supporter of the military. It is for the same reason the government has now scrupulously avoided talking about the financial impact of the scheme. No proposal for restructuring the armed forces would have passed the muster of the finance ministry without mentioning its financial implications. But the bureaucrats and generals have taken the political rhetoric to ludicrous limits. To see senior military officers claim with a straight face that the reason for initiating the short-term recruitment scheme is to make the age profile of the armed forces more youthful – when they know that there is nothing wrong with the age or physical fitness of our soldiers – is particularly distressing.

### Message to adversaries

Even more distressing is the message this step sends to India’s adversaries. They now know that under the current dispensation, India is unable to provide for the armed forces what the country needs to meet its strategic aims. Before this step for short-term recruitment was taken, the armed forces were already struggling with a lack of funds. Authorised 42 squadrons of fighter jets, the Indian Air Force is already down to 30 squadrons and facing a scenario where it will soon have fewer modern fighter jets than its Pakistani counterpart. The Indian Navy, the pre-eminent force for cooperation with the regional partners to check the rise of the Chinese navy, is down to around 130 vessels, while its stated goal was to be a 200-ship navy. Even as China has just started testing its third aircraft carrier, the Indian government has shot down the navy’s proposal to begin planning for a third carrier. The shortfall in funds for capital acquisition has reached that stage where money is not available for committed liabilities of contracts already signed, leading to undue delay in the supply of weapon systems and platforms.

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With a freeze on recruitment for the past two years, the army is currently short of more than 100,000 soldiers. There is talk of further ‘rightsizing’ the army, a euphemism for downsizing, without any concomitant reduction in its operational responsibilities against China, Pakistan, or in Kashmir and the North Eastern states. At least 60,000 additional soldiers are deployed against China in Ladakh, while other formations on the Line of Actual Control are also on a higher state of alert. To curtail manpower in such a scenario means an already stretched army will be strained further. Field tenures will be more frequent and longer, and time for training and rest will be much less, with shorter peace tenures. Any money being saved by the government is at the cost of the well-being of its soldiers and that endeavour is being taken to an extreme with the Agnipath scheme.

### Conclusions

This is not a ‘guns versus butter’ debate. It is a ‘guns versus soldiers’ debate. A good military needs both guns and soldiers, and the Indian economy – hammered by demonetisation, GST and lockdowns – is not in a position to provide for both. That has left India susceptible to external pressure from both adversaries and partners. China refuses to discuss with India the strategically important areas like Depsang and Demchok it has occupied since 2020 in Ladakh, while the US continues to press India to do more on various issues.

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There is no doubt that the Indian armed forces need reform. Agnipath is, however, not that reform. The proposal was never discussed publicly or debated in Parliament. It has neither undergone independent scrutiny nor been tried as a pilot project. Its timing and manner of the announcement have raised numerous disturbing questions. Those questions will only be answered over time, but it may be too late to make amends by then. The message has already gone out to India’s adversaries that New Delhi cannot afford the military it wants. No amount of government spin can hide the fact that a weakened military, courtesy Agnipath, leaves India more vulnerable and exposed.

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