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AGNIPATH SCHEME MUST BE DUMPED

A young recruit is no substitute for a seasoned soldier

by



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When the Agnipath scheme was first introduced, there were widespread protests across the country. Later candidates came forward for recruitment as ‘*Agniveers*’, essentially due to large scale unemployment in the country.

However, given the terms and conditions of their service, “*the scheme has not been able to draw the right material*”. Such are the inputs from various sources. The underlying compulsion for introducing such a scheme and whose brainchild this scheme is, has not been revealed. There are many assumptions to that end.

One is that “*the Pension Bill of Defence Forces is an excessive and disproportionately large part of the Defence Budget*”. The strength of the Armed Forces (Army, Navy and Air Force) is around 15 lakhs, while that of the civilians in the Ministry of Defence (MoD, DRDO, OFB, MES, Mil Estate etc) is 3.75 lakhs. The pension bill of Armed Forces personnel is much less, in proportion, than that of civil employees in the MoD. Pay and Pension Bill, as part of Defence Budget, appears large because the allocation for Defence is less than 2 percent of GDP. In the case of China’s GDP is five times more than India’s and its Defence allocation is 3 percent of it.

The other point, which has apparently led to the adoption of Agnipath scheme is to have a ‘*young defence force*’. At present a soldier retires at the age of 35/37 years, which from all angles, is young enough to perform well, his tasks during war.

In any case during such operations they follow their company and battalion commanders, who are generally in the 30 to 38 years age group. At the same time, **a young recruit is no substitute for a seasoned soldier.**

During the 1965 War, Pakistan had 'state of the art' tank fleet (Pattons) which was larger than the Indian Army's tank fleet. Indian tanks were of Second World War vintage. However, Indian tank crews were seasoned 'tank-men,' who have had years of training on the Field Firing Ranges. They were highly proficient in the field of tank gunnery. These experienced Indian Army tank crews were able to decimate Pakistan's far superior tank fleet. Hundreds of destroyed Patton tanks littered the battlefields of Khemkaran, in Punjab Sector and in Jammu and Kashmir.

Before bringing in a change in an existing system, particularly any drastic recasting of it, the first and foremost point is that some drawbacks or failing should have surfaced in such a system. Or an exceptionally better system should have emerged. Considering the past performance of Indian soldiers, no change was called for. Before adopting the new Agnipath scheme, it should have been thoroughly examined, analysed, evaluated and widely discussed. However a whimsical attempt at change can result in failures and failure in war can be a total disaster. **Soldiering is unlike any other profession.** It calls for total dedication, commitment to a cause, acceptance of extreme hardships and ever willingness to sacrifice one's life. Camaraderie, and regimental spirit are essential requirements in a soldier and to build these requires time, good leadership and right motivation and appropriate environments. Under the changed recruitment system, the Agniveers are to serve for a period of four years (including one year of training) after which only 25 percent would be re-enrolled. The remaining 75 percent will be given one time monetary grant of Rs 11.25 lakhs and discharged. Those 25 percent retained would serve for another 15 years only. The first four years would not be counted towards total service. Obviously those four years are wasted. Not including these four years will, on re-enrolment, impact their pay and subsequent pension. If at some future date courts were to order the inclusion of these four years, the total service would be 19 years, which would be one year short of earning 50 % of pay as pension. See how we shortchange our soldiers? Many Members of Parliament and Members of Legislative Assembly draw not one but six to seven pensions. They draw pension even if they are MP/MLA for a short period. **Why should any country balk from paying a soldier his meagre pension, more so when he is retired at age 35-37 years?**

One needs to look at another aspect of the Agnipath concept. Even if one is to overlook the existing deficiency of two lakh personnel in the army, on an average around 60,000 retire every year and therefore, that is the number to be recruited each year. However, last year, only 50,000 Agniveers were recruited. Therefore, this year the vacancies would be 70,000 (against those retiring: 60,000 plus 10,000 vacancies leftover from last year). After four years, when 75 percent of these Agniveers from the first batch will be discharged, the vacancies will be 60,000 + 42,500. That works out to 1,02,500. During the next 12 years these figures will keep increasing. Therefore the facilities for training such a large number of recruits will have to be created and all that will cost a substantial amount in terms of facilities and training staff. At the other end technical services, such as Navy and Air force and technical arms in the Army, consider this four years' service too short for a tradesman to measure up to his job. After 12 years of introduction of this system there would be four to 4.5 lakh Agniveers in their first four four years of service. In the event of a war, how will such a large number of

Agniveers impact the Army's performance? Out of these 75 percent will subsequently be due for discharge. Some of them would be looking forward to receiving Rs 11.25 lakhs on discharge and therefore averse to putting their life on the line and the other merged in cut-throat competition, so as to be amongst those 25 percent who will be retained.

What sort of camaraderie and team spirit is likely to prevail amongst them?

In the event of operations this will have its own impact on their performance and consequent outcome. Given the state of unemployment in the country, finding an alternate or second career will be a problem for those Agniveers discharged after four years. The present promise of reservation for ex-servicemen in various government departments is only on paper. The actual absorption of servicemen against existing promises of 10 percent and more is less than 1 percent. This is so, because there is much to be gained in direct recruitment in these organisations. More recently one Director General of a Central Police Organisation (CPO) stated that why should they take those '*rejected*' by the army.

The efficacy and consequently wisdom of bringing in this new system of enrolment of Agniveers will come to light in the next war, as and when it occurs. Whatever was the underlying idea of this proposal, it should have been best tried out with the CPOs. If funds, for the pension of Ex-Servicemen alone has been the reason for bringing in this new system, then it is better to enhance the retirement age of soldiers to 42 years. This step alone will substantially lower the pension bill of other ranks. In any case there is a compelling reason to increase the age of retirement of a soldier. The results of recent elections, to some extent, revealed the anger of our country folks on the adoption of the Agnipath scheme. We ought to be alive to the pitfalls in it and therefore, **jettison it sooner than later.**

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