

THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE AGNIVEER SYSTEM IS UNCLEAR: CHANGE FOR CHANGE'S SAKE, CAN RESULT IN FAILURE

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by



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If name alone could deliver, then much else becomes redundant and in fact superfluous. Therefore, will the name 'Agniveer' serve any purpose!

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 failings should have surfaced in the present system. Or has an exceptionally better system emerged.

Before an existing system of recruitment and service conditions, particularly one, which, if has been delivering well in the past, is dumped, it must be properly assessed and analysed. At the same time when we adopt a new system of recruitment in the military, namely, Agniveer system, then the underlying rationale for the change should have been spelled out. Did those recruited under the previous system not perform well during 1965, 1971 and Kargil war! If those recruited under the existing system and service conditions did measure up to the required standards, then there can hardly be a requirement for its change. Equally the proposed system must be fully assessed, analysed and evaluated. However a whimsical attempt at change can result in failures and failure in war is a total disaster.

During the early eighties, a view was projected that the officer selection system required change. Army Headquarters did not go in for any change before examining, in detail, the existing system: its drawbacks and failings if any. A committee was formed to examine the officer selection system and recruitment of other ranks, under the chairmanship of the Central Army Commander.

I was the Chairman of the Sub-Committee tasked to examine the officer selection system and recommend changes etc, if so required. I spent time with the Selection Boards, Commandant Indian Military Academy and a number of commanding officers and read through hundreds of Annual confidential Reports (ACRs) with the Military Secretary's Branch. Then a questionnaire (with a couple of dozen questions) was forwarded to 300 commanding officers, who had commanded units during 1965 and 1971 wars. The questions related to performance of young officers both during peace and war, their probity, leadership skills and competency. To avoid subjectivity, commanding officers were not to note the names of their units in response to the questionnaire.

The feed-back from commanding officers, IMA and Selection Boards and examinations of ACRs was positive: calling for no change in the selection system. I gave a presentation to the Chief of Army Staff at Army Headquarters on the outcome of my study, which resulted in a status quo of the existing system. This decision by the Army Chief to have no change in the officer selection system, was abundantly validated during Kargil operations, where officers, young and not so young, put up sterling performance.

The point is that no change should be brought about for the sake of change. Unfortunately, a drastic change in the recruitment of other ranks in the Defence services has been brought about without proper and known examination of the proposed system. Nor was the issue adequately debated within the services. At the same time the existing system's efficacy in terms of performance of those inducted into defence services through this system, during various wars and peace should have been kept in mind.

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, it requires time, good leadership and right motivation and appropriate environments.

Under the changed recruitment system, an Agniveer is to serve for a period of 4 years (including one year of training) after which only 25 percent would be retained and the remaining 75 percent discharged from service with, a onetime monetary grant of Rs 11 lakhs. Those retained would serve for another 15 years only. So far it appears that the first 4 years would not be counted. The catch in this being that 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 fifty percent as pension of last pay drawn. See how we shortchange the soldier.

Much talked about background to the decision for bringing in this system is the excess burden of pension of Ex-Servicemen. If that is the underlying reason for this drastic change (whose efficacy is suspect) then it shows a pronounced bias towards the soldier. The pension bill of all Central Armed Police Organisations (CPOs), viz. CRPF, BSF, ITBP, CISF, etc; and the State police is many times that of soldiers. **Army's strength is about 14 lakhs while that of civilians in the MoD is 3.75 lakhs. The average annual pension bill of army personnel is Rs 1.38 lakhs crore, while that of civilians in the MoD is Rs 5.38 lakhs crore.** While a Soldier retires at age 35/37, ones from the CPO and civilians in MoD continues to serve up to the age of 58/60 years. Thus a soldier and a policeman (from CPO) when both reach the age of 60 years, the policeman would have received many lakhs of Rupees more than a soldier, (at the existing rates of pay and pensions). Thereafter, a soldier's life ends while policeman carries on for another 7 to 8 years and continues to draw his pension.

It would be in order to note here that the life expectancy of a soldier in India, is around 59-61 years while that of policemen and others is around 67-68 years, while those from the railways, it is 71-73 years. The main reason for the shorter lifespan of a soldier is early retirement, less pension and increasing financial worries due to added expenditure on children's upbringing and education etc. Many MPs and MLAs draw not one but six to seven pensions. Even if an MP/MLA serves for just one day, he gets pension for life. **Why should any country balk at paying soldiers their legitimate meager pension, more so when he is retired at age 35-37 year.**

One needs to look at another aspect of the Agniveer concept. Even if one is to overlook the existing deficiency of 2 lakhs personnel in the Army, on an average around 60000 retire every year and therefore, that is the number to be recruited each year. However, only last year 50000 Agniveers were recruited. Therefore, this year the vacancies would be 70000 (against those retiring- 60000 plus 10000 less recruited last year). After 4 years, when 75 percent of these Agniveers from the first batch will be discharged, the vacancies will be 60000 plus 38500. That works out to 98500.

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. Therefore, after 12 years of introduction of this system there would be 3 to 3.5 lakhs Agniveers in their first four 4 years of service, where 75 percent of these will subsequently be due for discharge. Some of them would be looking forward to receiving Rs 11 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 in those 25

percent who will be retained. What sort of camaraderie and team spirit amongst them will prevail? Now 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 4 years. The present promise of reservation for Ex-Servicemen in various government departments is only on paper, whereas the actual absorption of servicemen against existing promises of 10 percent and more is less than 1 percent. This is essentially so because there is much to be gained in direct recruitment in these organisations. More recently one Director General of a 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 be the underlying idea of this proposal, it should have been best tried out with the Central Police Organisations (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 retirement age of soldiers.

Finally, military and national security issues are far too vital fields to adopt any trial and error proposition.