

## **WILL AGNIPATH CORRODE THE FINEST INSTITUTION OF INDIA?**

**Highlight: Press-Ganged Into Supporting Tour of Duty**

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by



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The mess created by the government in first announcing a new system of recruitment in the army and then trying to retrieve their bungling, reminds one of a few basic issues one learnt in the 40 years of service in the nation's army.

The important ones are 'let experts make changes'; 'do not lose sight of the end-state you want to achieve'; 'is it doable'; 'systematically produce a model that will work better than the current one'; and re-confirm that it is not motivated by any unauthorised individual or group and benefits the service'. Also Read - Communalism Plus Nationalism Sadly, while coming up with a proposal named Agnipath, the centrality of which are the so-called Agniveers, after working on it for over two years, as claimed, the government has offered a lemon to the nation! The end product presented after hundreds of hours of confabulations by presumably 'Sarkari' luminaries of all varieties, indicates that there seems to be neither application of mind, nor sufficient rigour.

It appears that a bare outline was given to the armed forces hierarchy, with orders to package it with so-called old and new reasons so that it comes out as a brilliant military scheme that also met the acute employment problem; saved funds and exuded nationalism of a particular type, with nary a thought to lowering the fighting abilities of the armed forces. It is now fairly clear that it was a plan to bolster electoral prospects with all trappings of fancy names and slogans!

No one seems to be bothered that this meritless scheme will fundamentally weaken the nation's sovereignty and defence; and bring down an institution that has always worked and which continues to be a 'deterrent' for the nation's adversaries. The serving military was obviously press-ganged into not only supporting the scheme, but was soon made the formal front, while most politico-bureaucratic caboodles, the real architects, safely withdrew, lest they be singled! That of course is par for the course, as they always get out of harm's way, leaving the military with the 'hot potatoes!' Also Read - Divinity! In a

democracy like ours, the polity elects political leaders and those in majority form the government, who not only derive their power from the Constitution but also have obligations to all citizens. It is also a truism that one of the essential tasks, if not the most important, of the government is to ensure the sovereignty and defence of the nation, by maintaining a military that can deliver at all times. While the Indian Military has understood this since Independence, it sometimes appears that the 'Sarkar' forgets it and makes political demands that can be termed incorrect and inappropriate. The scheme under discussion is the latest broadside let loose on the nation in general and the military in particular, amongst many earlier ones that are well-known and need not be repeated here! It is touted as a reform of the military, but in effect it is yet another step in weakening strong institutions created to adhere to the Constitution of India. Do reflect on how institutions created and nurtured by earlier political leaders/governments for governing the country, conforming to what has been laid down in the Constitution, have been diluted systematically and the military was perhaps the latest!

I do not think I am a prophet of doom, but one of the many right-thinking citizens of India, who do not get swayed by disruptive ideologies that have been let loose and are bent on destroying the centuries old ethos and culture of India that had made our nation so unique and forward looking, where diversity was the glue and the doctrine of '*Athiti Devo Bhava*' prevailed.

Having vented my feelings, let me revert to the new Recruiting Scheme of which Agnipath is the central hinge. So much has already been written about the ill effects of this scheme that repeating them is not really called for. However, there are other more important but related issues that need to be highlighted. It is my hunch that the government knew that there would be massive opposition to the scheme, but politics over-ruled common sense, as has been happening in our country lately. Agnipath was part of a three-pronged plan to firstly make sure that the scheme was adopted and in the process of doing so, weaken and bring down the commanding reputation of the military in the hearts and minds of the citizens of our country. Lastly, it was hoped by the bureaucracy, including of the uniformed variety that the failure of such a scheme would hopefully bring down the military a peg or two, which they have been working on for long but could not achieve for obvious reasons! The serving fraternity must also share the blame for lumping it, knowing what havoc it will create, but the vociferous veterans have been a different kettle of fish! Thank God for small mercies!

Many are convinced that the scheme was never a stand-alone idea, but had two other proposals/policies attached to it. The first was to precede the announcement of the Agnipath Scheme and the second was to follow, thus completing the trinity. With a view to ensure that the Scheme went with a bang, the CDS appointment was kept waiting to be filled for over six months and it is still in the same state. When the Agnipath Scheme was ready to be announced, it was preceded by a formal announcement as to who all were eligible to be appointed as the next CDS.

It appeared initially that the government was at last going to adhere to some norms for the selection of the next CDS. However, discerning analysts and right-thinking persons soon questioned why a formal policy was now being made when none was made or announced when the late General Rawat was made the first CDS! It may be recalled that at that time it was announced as a fiat, without any explanations or preparatory time. Apparently, the aim was to ensure that the phalanx that comprised such an all-encompassing eligibility criterion, consisting of all Lt Gens, Equivalents from Navy and Air Force, and above, including those who had retired, numbering perhaps over 200, would be enough to prevent them from voicing negative opinions. This policy announcement indicates that this ploy has worked, although not fully!

Let me now come to the last point of the trilogy, which relates to sacrificing the regimental system that is a great strength of the Indian Army. It has been talked about for long but is a favourite of petty political leaders who have nothing to do except to strut around arrogantly and remain in public view, by raising issues without understanding the repercussions of such actions! Luckily, the Sarkar while making many of its clarifications on the Agnipath Concept was quick to deny that this was not intended. However, it could always be raised at a more opportune time!!

It is unfortunate that most people do not fully understand what is meant by the Regimental System. This needs to be explained, as even the National Security Adviser (NSA) has been making vague and inappropriate statements on the subject.

Sometime back, I had to write an article to correct him about wars and how the militaries deal with the defence of the nation, which can be viewed at:

<https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/4/21154/A-Convolutd-Definition-Of-Fourth-Generation-War>.

While the government has stepped back for the present about doing away with the Regimental system, it remains part of it as a highly tedious system of recruitment and training of the Agnipath Scheme. It needs to be noted that governments have at various times hinted at such moves and for the present government it is part of its so-called ideology. Hence the danger remains and therefore the need to explain what precisely is the military's view on our regimental system and the somewhat woolly view of others.

In the broader sense, the army consists of Regiments of Combat Arms (like Infantry, Armoured Corps) and Corps or Services (like EME, Ordnance, ASC and so on), like most armies, but when talking of the Regimental System, it refers to only the combat arms. Even the NSA in his latest speech referring to the Agnipath Scheme was referring to the former, whether in ignorance or deliberately! The Regimental System, which is in the eye of the storm, relates to those infantry and armoured corps units which comprise either one class or fixed class soldiers as opposed to units that have no class orientation and the soldiers can be from all classes and regions. Some examples will clarify the issue, for which I have chosen my regiment as in many ways, it is the microcosm of practically all infantry battalions of the army.

My regiment fields a large number of battalions of different types. The Regiment's home is the Regimental Centre located at Belgaum (Karnataka), which not only trains recruits but acts as the mother depot of the regiment. The entire manpower of the Regimental Centre, including instructors, comes from the battalions of the Regiment. The Centre is commanded by a specially chosen Brigadier, who plays a very important role in all aspects except operations of all Regular, Territorial Army, Rashtriya Rifles battalions; as also affiliated units of not just the army but also of the Navy and Air Force as part of joint approaches.

The regimental aspects of his duties are also overseen by the Colonel of the Regiment, who is a senior flag rank officer elected by all ranks of the Regiment, who is the father-figure of the Regiment. In brief, the Regiment is a cohesive family and that is how regimental spirit, ethos and camaraderie are built-up. In June 1961, I was commissioned in the senior most battalion of my regiment, viz. 1 Maratha LI that had formerly been awarded the *nom d' guerre* Jangi Paltan within 20 years of its raising in 1768, as part of the then Bombay Army. Its name kept changing over the years, but the soldiers were recruited from the general region that now conforms to the Maharashtra State and a few adjoining areas. The battalion was and continues to be a single class unit with 100% Marathas. In 1977, I commanded 18 Maratha LI, a newly raised battalion with a fixed class composition of 75% Marathas, 15% Karnataka boys and 10% Muslims from South. From the oldest to the youngest battalion of the Regiment was quite a change, but at no stage I found any difference in how the soldiers and Junior Commissioned Officers (JCO's) of both battalions responded. Both units have served with great distinction and continue to do so.

When the erstwhile Princely states were amalgamated into India, their small forces were distributed to the Regiments of the Indian Army. These were re-designated as regimental battalions. Our regiment got three battalions, 19 Maratha LI from the Kolhapur State Forces; 20 Maratha LI from the Baroda State Forces; and 22 Maratha LI from the Hyderabad State Forces. While the first two were single class regiments, the third, from Hyderabad is a mixed class battalion with a class composition of 50% Marathas and 50% Muslims from South. There is no difference in functioning of the three battalions and indeed in the functioning of all battalions of the Regiment. Let me also mention how regiments assist in the formation of specialised regiments, like the Parachute, Mechanised and Special Forces (SF) regiments of the army.

At the end of the Second World War, my regiment had given our 3 Maratha LI to the Parachute Regiment, which was renamed 2 Para (Maratha). When the Mechanised Regiment was formed in the Eighties, we had given our 20 Maratha LI to them; it was renamed as 10 Mechanised Infantry (Maratha) and then again, in 1995, we gave our 21 Maratha LI to the Special Forces Regiment, which was renamed 21 Para SF (Maratha). 21 Maratha LI has also had a chequered career. It was raised in 1985, as a mixed class battalion, comprising one company each of Marathas, Jats; Dogras; and Punjabis; this was an experiment following Operation Blue Star. Despite the heterogeneous composition of

the battalion, the Maratha spirit excelled and the unit did extremely well. Due to its exceptional performance, it was awarded the first Chief of Army Staff Citation in 1992. In 1994, as the Colonel of the Regiment, I chose the Battalion for conversion to Special Forces and it vindicated my selection by becoming 21 Para (SF) two years later.

I do hope the readers now understand how the regimental system works in our infantry battalions. In the Armoured Corps, the other combat Arm, the system is the similar with some variations. Then why does the Sarkar want to change such a cohesive and war-winning system, which is not only time-tested but is the heart and soul of our army? Let me end this missive by earnestly requesting the Sarkar not to interfere with an immensely professional and war-winning system.

**For a detailed discussion on weakening institutions, please see my comprehensive article at:**

<http://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/4/13671/Weakening-Institutions-Defence-Planning-Committee-is-a-Case-in-Point>

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