

[AGNIPATH: A PATH TOWARDS SELF-IMMOLATION?](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/agnipath-path-towards-self-immolation-lt-gen-p-g-kamath/)

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by



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Soon after the announcement of Agnipath, the discontented youths across the country gave vent to their frustrations and there were a series of ugly incidents of arson and rioting. Unfortunately, several young men were arrested and one died due to firing. The government was clearly on the back foot and started to tweak the scheme to assuage the angry youths. Now the question arises as to why was the scheme not thought over in its entirety before its announcement? Who is the brain behind it? Why there was no pilot project tried before its final launch? If it had national ramifications, why was it not discussed in the parliament? Was it referred to Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence? Why were the three service chiefs not a part of the CCS when the decision was taken? The country has seen a trend that the three services are being represented by NSA? Has he been made a super CDS? Does he know the nuances of the Armed Forces? Let alone, the service chiefs, a former Army Chief who is in the cabinet was not even consulted. When reporters asked him about Agnipath; he responded that he was not in the team that had framed it and he is not fully aware of the scheme. Let alone, taking inputs from informed people even inputs from experts within the cabinet have not been taken. **I am amazed at the way political decisions are taken and foisted on the Armed Forces to destroy its integrity and compromise national security.**

Finally, when there was a national uproar, the government went into the background and put forward the three service chiefs on the national media to show to the nation that it was the handiwork of the Chiefs and we politicians and bureaucrats had very little do in the decision making. Isn't the government completely shirking its main responsibility? Why not a word from the NSA? Most of the time, he comes on the national media and controls even minor tactical operations of battalion and company commanders, as during the Pathankot airbase strike. Has the RM really thought about the whole scheme? Why is the RM not coming forward to take on the responsibility? Firing political guns from the shoulders of the Armed Forces is not expected from a responsible government.

The anti-national forces within the country were just waiting for such national frustrations to exploit. The collective anger of our youths, who felt that the government has blown their dreams into pieces, was harnessed to burn trains and create mayhem. It would be the same train by which the soldiers come on holidays to meet their families. The same

arsonists would also use the same train as and when they get recruited. The heady mix of testosterone and anger knows no logic. Absolutely, a bad move by the government and heads need to roll for not preparing the environment for accepting the turbulent reform. The RM and the NSA have to take the blame squarely!

What hurts the most? Let me recount.

With the onset of Chinese aggression when the country had to gird up its loins for the war; the government stopped recruiting in order to implement Agni Path, two years later.

With the Chinese still at the gate, we are making transformational changes in the Armed Forces without even a pilot project.

Dreams of lakhs of youth who are aspirants to join the armed forces having waited for two years were destroyed with the announcement of Agnipath. The initial age stipulations had kept all of them out. When the pent-up anger erupted the government went into huddle and increased the age for recruitment to 23 years, for the current year.

Next, the scheme has done away with caste, class, and region-based regiments which have survived for more than 300 years. The configuration has changed to All India Composition. This elicited strong protests not only from veterans but also from the aspirants as they were deprived of joining their traditional regiments. Class and region-based configuration had a tremendous advantage as one's poor performance in battle will be divulged by his colleagues to others in the village. It is such an emotive and empowering force that soldiers would be rearing to go into battle for their honour and reputation. He not only has to accomplish in front of his superiors but also for the tradition of his unit and for his honour and standing in front of his family and village. How can a politician who is fooling people or a bureaucrat wearing a bloated ego who only pushes papers ever comprehend the ethos? Just to allay the concerns of the general public the 'all India composition' is already in place in the existing system without having to destroy the edifice of regimentation. The recruitment into the Indian Army is based on the 'Male Recruitable Population (MRP) of States'. This automatically ensures that the character and composition of the Indian Army have always been national. The Government realised the folly and tweaked the scheme so that the class-based regiments will continue and will not be interfered with. However, this has not been reconfirmed by the government.

Next, the scheme was restricted to four years. It was actually a master stroke by the Defence Accounts so the Agniveers should not be eligible for gratuity. The so-called severance package of ₹ 11 lakhs **is a misnomer**. Actually, fifty per cent is the contribution of the Agniveers from their frugal pay and what the government gives is the other fifty per cent.

The assurances by MHA that ten per cent of vacancies will be reserved for released Agniveers in CAPFs are assurances which need follow-up. Many such reservations are also in vogue for the veterans and many innovative measures are invented by the recruiting agency so as not to fill such vacancies. The same has been also assured in Coast Guard. These are fire brigade actions to douse the fire in an emergency. Experience has shown that such promises are rarely kept.

The next misnomer is that it will lead to a younger profile in infantry battalions. This was touted by the General Officer posted in the Dept of Military Affairs. In every infantry battalion, 35 to 45 personnel go on superannuation each year. They are replaced by an equal number of young recruits in the age group of 18 to 20 years. So, the young blood keeps on getting replenished in a battalion with those who are retiring at the age of 35-37 years. The age profile of an infantry battalion already ranges from the twenties to mid-thirties.

Those of us who have served with soldiers understand that the real toughness, tenacity, muscle toning and endurance, ability to withstand hunger and thirst, mental resilience and battlefield experience peaks in his late twenties and early thirties. Soldiers and also officers at that age are the battle winners. Soldiers in their early twenties are really not that tough and are greenhorns. Their muscle strength, lung capacity, rhythm coordination between steps and breathing while walking in high altitude terrain, the conservation of energy for days together with minimal rest and most important of all, their mental tenacity have not developed. These qualities develop in soldiers with experience and blossom only in their late twenties and early thirties. The combat effectiveness of the battalion is a mix of both. I see a civilian provenance in the origin of this scheme. It cannot be a brainchild of a soldier and its implementation would certainly help our adversaries by depriving the Army of its battle-winning element.

The General officer of DMA also claimed to have studied several models of other Countries before adopting them in the Indian Armed Forces. Please let me know one country that has threat perceptions similar to ours? Two colluding nuclear powers as adversaries, longest unresolved borders on our frontiers, two states are being claimed by two of our adversaries, lakhs of square KMs of our territory under their illegal occupation, a part of our territory has been given away by one hostile country to another hostile country, geo-strategic and geo political squeezing of our country by alienating our neighbours, a history of five major wars and several conflicts with our hostile neighbours, internal turmoil in the North East, North and Central India, anti-national elements and political parties within the country losing no opportunity to destroy our Nation, and the most recent the apparent loss of Depsang Plains to China, and still we want to copy models of other countries for whom the identification of threat is academic, if not a product of fertile imagination. Add to this, our articulate Foreign Minister prevaricating to the general public that patrolling points need not be held and defences are actually occupied in depth. He was plainly referring to PPs 10, 11, 12 and 13 in Depsang Plains which earlier and

currently as well, are not held. However, the Minister is not telling the whole truth that the ITBP has not patrolled these points for the last two and half years as the Chinese are not letting it do it. I don't understand as to why are we belting out half-truths?

Many countries across the world have a problem with volunteers for their forces. Russia is finding difficulties in getting recruitment. The rest of the European countries are under the NATO which has laid down the minimum force which needs to be held. A few countries have resorted to compulsory conscriptions. Some countries have citizen forces. As also, some countries have a large number of reservists. Our country is a completely different cup of tea as there is no dearth of volunteers. Our geopolitical context demands that we have a 'Standing armed force' to safeguard our country. We also tend to forget that this country was a slave country for over two centuries and the freedom that we gained is precious. Also, since independence India is one of those countries that has lost maximum territories to neighbours, and still, we want to ape models of other countries where the armed forces are more of a constitutional obligation rather than to defend an existential live threat.

The next misnomer is that the salaries and pensions of the armed forces are bloated. Defence Pensions take a huge chunk of defence budgets. This is the storyline propagated by the government. Do not politicians, bureaucrats, or lower bureaucracy of central and state governments get their pensions? It is what the government wants the nation to believe. Never mind the politicians take pensions for even a truncated term. Several of them draw multiple pensions. However, the pensions for the Armed Forces, the country cannot afford. This narrative has been broadcasted relentlessly by the government with bureaucrats heading the charge. Remember on 21 May 2020, when the Armed Forces were countering the Chinese incursions the Defence Secretary has time to attend a seminar at MP-IDSA and lament about the rising pension bills.

Has the government told the public that a third of defence pensions is pocketed by defence civilians? What measures has the government taken to reduce their pensions and salaries? Why is the government targeting only the Armed Forces? Does the government or bureaucrats have something against the country's armed forces? **I fail to understand how a government can destroy the operational effectiveness of its own armed forces?**

Now you tell me; is it fair on the government to turn the Armed Forces topsy turvy and introduce catastrophic changes which adversely affect the operational preparedness of the Armed Forces, more so with the Chinese amassing forces across the borders? We have literally lost over 1000 Sq. KMs of territory in the last two years; do not listen to sob explanations of the Foreign Minister to assuage the naïve public. Such false statements will only make the Chinese harden their position.

It is a well-known management principle that whatever is running smoothly in the organisation; do not meddle with it. There are enough things in the country which are in utter chaos. Next, you do not blunt the sword before the war when the enemy is forming up in Ladakh. Next, isn't it high time to reduce the pensions of politicians and ensure that all of them are authorised only one pension after serving for a minimum period of 15 years? Reduce the bloated bureaucracy and get youngsters on Tour of Duty to man government departments and ministries. Please also send them without pension and gratuity. It will certainly curb corruption as before a person gains expertise in it; he has completed his tenure.

Lastly; it is better for the government to do a course correction to the scheme. Class/caste/fixed class compositions of the regiments to stay so that the regimentation; the edifice of the integrity of units is not disrupted. Let Agnipath scheme go forward in 2022 to save the face of the government. It should be cancelled next year. Remove Defence Pensions from the Head of Defence Budget. Club it with the pensions of the government as was existing a few years before. Alternatively, remove pensions paid to civilians who masquerade as uniformed personnel from the defence budget. Implement the Tour on Duty in all government departments as it is most of them are overstaffed.

A tailpiece is that the PM during the inauguration of Pragati Maidan Corridor has lamented "good things brought with good intentions are getting trapped in politics". The PM is an honourable person and I do not doubt his intentions: However, he should first ascertain the intentions of his advisers before giving a green signal for its implementation? It is worth finding out whether the nation trusts his advisers? **The Honourable PM could also consider whose head should roll?**

END

About the Author

Lt Gen PG Kamath, PVSM, AVSM, YSM, SM is a highly decorated Officer of the Indian Army; who retired as the Commandant of the prestigious Army War College, Mhow. He is a prolific writer on matters Military; and, National Defence & Security.

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