



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



## DPG POLICY BRIEF

### The Agnipath Scheme: Analysis and A Way Forward

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**Delhi Policy Group**

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### Cover Photographs:

*Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh with three service chiefs at a press conference announcing the Agnipath Scheme, June 14, 2022. Source: PIB*

*Vice Chief of the Army Lt. Gen. B. S. Raju explaining the Agnipath Scheme, June 15, 2022. Source: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting*

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# The Agnipath Scheme: Analysis and A Way Forward

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## Introduction

On June 14, 2022, in a highly publicised press conference attended by the Raksha Mantri and the three Service Chiefs, the Indian government unveiled the Agnipath scheme for the armed forces. The scheme is a radical departure from past practices of recruiting soldiers into the military. Henceforth, all soldiers (called Agniveers) will be recruited for four years, after which the military will retain only 25 percent of them for permanent absorption. Over time, the manning level in the military would become a 50:50 mix of Agniveers and regular soldiers.

The sudden announcement of the Agnipath scheme has led to widespread and violent protests in many states. The protestors are agitating against the short-term engagement and the compulsory retirement without any gratuity and pension benefits. Many veterans have also cautioned that the scheme could have an adverse impact on the professionalism and the ethos of the military.

This brief will attempt a dispassionate analysis of the Agnipath scheme, its advantages and possible shortfalls, and a suggested way ahead.

## Highlights of the Agnipath Scheme

All recruitment in the military will now be carried out under the Agnipath scheme. Enrolment would be on an 'All India All Class' basis, and youth selected under this scheme will be called Agniveers and serve for four years, including a training period of six months. After four years, 25 percent of Agniveers will be selected for permanent service while the balance will be released to find alternate employment.

The Agniveers will start with a monthly salary of Rs 30,000, going up to Rs 40,000 in the fourth year. One-third of the wage will go into the Agniveer Corpus Fund, with an equal contribution by the government. At the end of four years, an accumulated amount of Rs 11.71 lakh would be paid to each Agniveer. In addition, a non-contributory life insurance cover of Rs 48 lakh would be provided for the duration of the engagement. There would be no gratuity or pension for Agniveers. Individuals selected for permanent service would be required to serve for a further engagement period of a minimum of 15 years.

The four years served as Agniveers would not count towards pensionable service.

The government has announced various schemes to ease the transition of Agniveers into a second career. The Education Ministry will launch a special bachelor's degree programme for serving defence personnel that will recognise the skill training received by them during their tenure in the forces. In addition, a 10 percent reservation for Agniveers has been approved for jobs in central police forces, Assam Rifles, and civilian posts in the Ministry of Defence.

### **Agnipath Positives**

The Raksha Mantri and the service chiefs have hailed the scheme as 'transformational' and one that would have a "positive impact on the human resource management of the armed forces." There have been a series of press conferences in which senior officers have listed the scheme's advantages. With the induction of Agniveers, the average age profile of the armed forces would come down by 4-5 years; in the case of the army, from 32 to 26 years. Younger soldiers would be fitter and be able to operate more capably in the highly challenging terrain along India's borders.

It is also expected that the quick turnover of Agniveers would ensure a constant stream of technology-savvy youth into the military. With an enhanced technology threshold, these individuals would be adept at handling the modern equipment being inducted into the armed forces. It is also proposed to tap into the talent available in recognised technical institutes.

By retaining only 25 percent of Agniveers for permanent service, the military could pick the best among them, who would then be groomed for Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs). Considering the shortage of officers in the Indian military, it is essential that the NCOs are of the highest quality.

The government and the military are silent on the issue of manpower savings that would accrue due to the Agnipath scheme. However, it is apparent that the rising pay and pension budget has been a key factor in rolling out the scheme that will significantly cut down on the number of soldiers who retire with pensions.

There is also no doubt that the military requires restructuring, particularly the 1.2 million-strong army. While there have been discussions within the military about rightsizing, there has been little move forward in implementation. It is not known whether the reluctance within the military to restructure led to the government pushing for the Agnipath scheme. However, what is clear is that

over a period of time, there will be a steady reduction in the salary and pension budget. The money saved could go towards modernisation and technology upgradation in the military.

The government has also framed this as a nation-building exercise. The Ministry of Defence press release states that after their stint of four years, "the Agniveers will be infused into the civil society where they can contribute immensely towards the nation-building process." After the protests against the scheme broke out, the government announced various measures, including reservations in government jobs for retiring Agniveers. This could allay some of the apprehensions among the youth about their post-military career prospects.

## **Agnipath Concerns**

There are many voices against the Agnipath scheme, from youth on the streets to politicians and some military veterans. I will attempt to cut through the political clutter and outline some genuine concerns. These concerns are centred around intangible but extremely vital issues like the military's ethos, professionalism, and operational capability.

The military profession is not just another job but a calling where individuals stand ready to sacrifice all in service to the nation. Soldiers view themselves as fulfilling a higher purpose and are proud members of a profession built on values like honour, loyalty, integrity, self-sacrifice, and brotherhood. There should be no shift away from this calling towards viewing the military as just an occupation.

Unit cohesion, particularly in the army, is a battle-winning factor. This comes through bonding together of soldiers, a common purpose, subordination of self-interest, and complete identification with each other. The question is whether unit cohesion would be diluted when there are two classes of soldiers with different service conditions. Would the Agniveers, looking at the military as a stepping-stone for a future career, have the same morale and motivation levels as regular soldiers? Would the competition among the Agniveers for the 25 percent permanent posts strengthen or weaken unit cohesion?

How would the shortening of the training period affect operational effectiveness? It has been mentioned that the Agniveers will be mentored by experienced soldiers when they enter their units. However, it is one thing to mentor Agniveers for technical jobs and a different proposition when they are straight away pitched into situations on a live border or in counter-terrorist operations involving life and death. Moreover, as more and more Agniveers get



recruited into the military, ultimately reaching 50 percent in the next ten years, what kind of responsibilities can these inexperienced soldiers be assigned?

Would the attractiveness of the military career reduce as the youth look for a job with greater stability? Is 'Josh' and 'Jazba' enough motivation for the rural young who constitute a vast majority of the intake into the military? In the long run, this could affect the quality of recruits that enter the armed forces.

All future recruitment will be on an All India All Class basis. How would this impact the Indian Infantry's regimental system that has stood the test of time? The army has clarified that currently, no change is proposed in the regimental system, but it is unclear how this would be finally reconciled with all-India recruitment. The regimental system is being called a colonial legacy, but this is not a good enough reason for abandoning a structure that has been the backbone of the infantry, the main fighting force of the army.

These are all important questions, but there is no way to provide an accurate answer to them at this stage. The impact of the Agnipath scheme will also not be even or similar across all arms and services. For example, the requirements of soldiering for a technician at an airbase are entirely different from an infantry jawan operating along the Himalayan watershed. As more and more Agniveers get inducted, we may find that they are more suitable for particular types of jobs.

Many opinions have been expressed that the military ethos, operational efficiency, and professionalism will not be affected because there will only be a gradual induction of Agniveers. However, this is a serious matter and cannot be guided by mere opinions, there must be an empirical yardstick. It is, therefore, suggested that the scheme be put through a rigorous testbed before its final adoption. This cannot be a shot in the dark.

## Validating the Agnipath Scheme

The first four years of the Agnipath scheme should be treated purely as a validation period. The primary purpose of the validation should be to assess the scheme's impact on the operational efficiency of the military. All other repercussions are secondary.

A four-year testbed involving approximately 180,000 Agniveers can be considered a somewhat excessive exercise. However, the government is determined to go ahead with the Agnipath scheme, and this provides an opportunity to carry out a comprehensive validation. Going through one complete life cycle of Agniveers will enable a greater understanding of how



they will fit into different roles, from combat to logistics to technical services. Each of these roles requires different skills and adaptation to different conditions. The four-year period would also reveal how the Agniveers react as they approach the end of their enrolment period and the numbers that are able to move to a satisfactory second career.

After conducting a comprehensive review, the military leadership should present their findings to the government. The conclusions should focus on assessing the Agnipath scheme's impact on the military's operational effectiveness. If required, the government should be open to changes, including significant modifications to the scheme.

There is an argument that a testbed is unnecessary as the Raksha Mantri is already empowered to make changes in the Agnipath scheme, where needed. However, a testbed approach is fundamentally different. If a scheme is already declared 'transformational' and the view taken that any impact on operational effectiveness is a 'myth,' any changes made are likely to be cosmetic. On the other hand, acceptance of the scheme as a testbed will open the government and the military to significant modifications.

## Rehabilitation of Agniveers

After the widespread protests in the country, the post-retirement employment of the Agniveers has dominated the debate on the Agnipath scheme. The military's view is that its primary focus is to win battles and not to prepare people for future jobs. Nevertheless, rehabilitation of Agniveers is important for two reasons.

First, the relationship between a soldier and the state is characterised by a mutual obligation that is often referred to as the 'military covenant'. A soldier willingly puts himself in harm's way to defend national interests. In return, the nation promises him dignity, recognition, gratitude, and appropriate compensation for his sacrifices. This bond is a crucial element in sustaining militaries, and it is essential that the Agniveers not feel abandoned after their service.

Second, if the Agniveers do not find proper rehabilitation after leaving the military, the attractiveness of a uniformed career could decline. This could adversely impact the quality of recruits opting for the military. For these two reasons, the government and the private sector must step up to do whatever is possible to ensure that the Agniveers can transition to a second career.



## Conclusion

Currently, there are two divergent viewpoints about the Agnipath scheme. One describes it as "the single biggest human resources management transformation in the Indian military." With its implementation, the military will become a "future-ready fighting force, capable of meeting multiple challenges across the full spectrum of conflict." That view is based on a presumption which will need to be validated and cannot be treated as a dogma.

The second viewpoint urges caution and voices concern over the long-term impact of the scheme on training standards, unit cohesion, and operational effectiveness. Understandably, these are also intangible issues, and there is no way to accurately or immediately gauge whether operational capability will be impacted or not.

It is, therefore, recommended that the first four years of the Agnipath scheme be treated as a testbed from which valuable lessons can be learned. Perhaps there is already a move in this direction with the Vice Chief of Army Staff, Lieutenant General B. S. Raju, stating: "What we are doing is actually a pilot project," and based on this experience, "necessary changes could be brought about." With national security at stake, a radical change of the kind envisaged by the Agnipath scheme must be put through a rigorous test, and as found necessary adapted, before final implementation.

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