



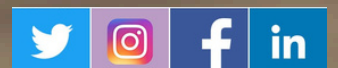
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ISSUE BRIEF
IB/09/24

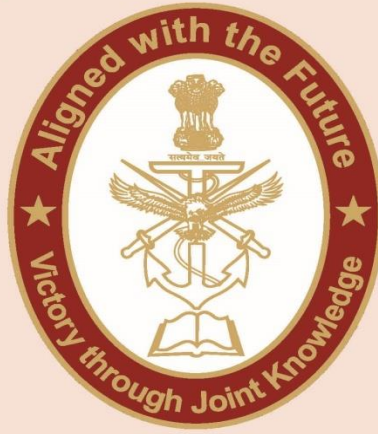
UNWRAPPING THE AGNIPATH ENIGMA

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UNWRAPPING THE AGNIPATH ENIGMA



Lt Gen Ajai Singh (Retd), a volunteer Kargil/ Siachen war veteran, was the 5th generation of his family in the Army/ Armoured Corps with family service covering over 162 years in the 164 years from 13 Sep 1858. He retired after over 43 years of training cum service on 30 Apr 2023 as the 16th Commander-in-Chief of the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC). He is currently an Executive Council member of the USI.

“Please do not play politics with National Security”

Background

As the election results have been announced, as an ex-serviceman (or Veteran as per the new term) with over 43 years of service and military training, one can only feel sad at the “*party line*” polarization of debates one is witnessing, even on national security issues, rather than informed discussion. And unfortunately, some of our senior Veterans are fully part of it. The Govt’s Agnipath scheme is a special topic of discussion and without being aware of the details, while politicking some people have even gone so far as calling our Agniveers ‘*labourers*’ and have referred to two classes in the Army – ‘*ordinary*’ and ‘*officer ka beta*’ and alluded to a hypothetical unfairness in retention selection that will take place, when such Agniveer retention selection is still over two years away for the first batch of Agniveers and more for subsequent batches. On the Govt side, too there is surprising silence on an a much desired and important scheme, of such far-reaching implications for the Army. This may be due to angst against it in many Northern districts and its political implications during elections.

This article, from publicly available material, will in an unbiased manner, go into the various facets of the new Agnipath policy, unravel the issues involved and recommend an optimal way forward. **It will also establish how the scheme addresses two long pending imperative needs of the Army. One of reducing the average age of soldiers** – a felt need established since the Sri Lanka experience (1987-1990) as well

as during the Kargil operations (1999) and pending in the recommendations of the Kargil Review Committee (KRC), the Group of Ministers (GoM) Recommendations, as well as recommendations of the Standing Committee of Parliament on Defence (SCOD). **The other is of the burgeoning pension bill after the colour service extensions of 1965 and 1976 which extended the minimum service of soldiers from 7 to 10 and then 15 years and so made 100% of the soldiers eligible for pension which is given after 15 years of service - from about 35% getting pension till 1976.** The pension of a soldier retiring at *Rs 95 a month in 1981 (now equivalent to about Rs 1990 in 2024, when indexed to inflation)*, after the 6th and 7th pay commissions and OROP is now over Rs 33,000 a month for a soldier who passes no promotion tests and retires after 17 years of colour service. An unsustainable figure which will keep escalating exponentially going forward. With increasing life expectancy, and 100% soldiers getting pension, the number of defence pensioners have seen a rise from 3.8 lakhs in 1950, to 6 lakhs in 1970 and 26.8 lakhs in 2021 – a 705% increase in number of pensioners in 71 years from 1950. Pensions meanwhile went up from Rs 95 in 1981 to Rs 33,000 in 2024, or an over 347-time increase – and now applicable for 100% soldiers retiring, from only 35% retiring soldiers getting pension earlier. **Finally, the article will establish how the Agnipath scheme, tweaked a bit will meet all the needs which are currently causing angst and so being politically exploited, and meet a long felt need of the Army, which no one has been able to address so far, but for this bold initiative of the present Govt.** The Agnipath is an offshoot of an initiative of the then Army Chief, Gen Naravane under a new policy for the Army called “*Tour of Duty*” recommended to the Govt. The Govt accepted the policy, and now soldiers too will serve for lesser than pensionable periods, like the Army’s existing Short Service commissioned officer entry scheme. **As this brief will bring out, the scheme is good, and a long-felt need resulting from studies of the Sri Lanka and Kargil operations shared with the Parliaments Standing Committees of Defence but not actioned upon till now. It is recommended that while tweaks to the scheme to meet the Army’s requirements as well as aspirations of the Agniveers are in order, political opportunism should not result in parties/ leaders promising to cancel the scheme, for that will be equivalent to ‘throwing the baby out with the bath water’.**

I am sure on one issue we will all agree. This is that the Armed Forces are our Nation’s “*Brahmastra*”. They are the weapon of last resort, and after that there is nothing. There is a phrase “*If you think education is expensive, try ignorance*”. In our context, I would paraphrase it to say: “*If you think National Security is expensive, try surrender*”. And if one were to think the statement as flippant, do read up on national sentiment towards the closing stages of the 1962 war and the then PM’s fervent messages and letter of appeal to the US President for help. We have come a long way since then, and *Atmanirbharta* and *capabilities developed* are the only currencies that will elicit respect in international realpolitik. This is especially important, when we consider our vast un-demarcated borders and adversaries who would want to exploit these as pressure points, to influence our national policies. As an Indian, one can only feel deep pride, when we consider the manner in which our Armed Forces have risen to the occasion and stood up to attempted Chinese pressure tactics on our borders,

and also the manner in which we as a country have navigated recent stormy issues and stood up for our own national interests in the face of severe pressures, on issues such as the Ukrainian crises, oil imports from Russia, the Gaza conflict, our national interests at Chabahar, continued Chinese intransigence and their attempted bullying in the hope of finding weakness. It is in the face of such major National security challenges, that we as a nation need to rise and find '*collective strength*' and not succumb to petty politics, if we sniff political opportunity in emotive issues. And yes, for that, both sides need to accommodate more. Now back to Agnipath.

Enough has been written on Agnipath and the ORF Issue Brief of Aug 22 has adequate details for anyone wanting to glean the fine print. **In essence:** a 4-year term of service, with (currently) 25% being retained for regular soldier employment with tenure starting afresh. A salary of Rs 30,000 in the first year, progressively increasing to Rs 40,000 by the 4th year. No pension, but an IT exempt severance package of Rs 11.71 lakhs (called '*seva nidhi*') comprising of 30% contribution from own salary, 30% matched by the Govt and the balance accruing from interest earned. Also, a non-contributory life insurance of Rs 48 lakhs and an ex-gratia payment of Rs 44 lakhs. No other benefits such as ECHS or access to CSDs and no 'ex-servicemen' status. Towards subsequent employment, the Govt has made provision for 10% reservation for Agniveers in CAPFs, Assam Rifles, Coast Guard, defence civilian posts and 16 DPSUs. Also, opportunities in Merchant Navy, and employment priority for state police forces. Towards this, to empower the Agniveers, those 10th class pass, they will be given 12th class certificates based on their training and course syllabus. Also 60 credits (50%) for graduation from IGNOU, based on their skill and experiential training. Therefore, what are the actual and perceived factors that are making emotive issues that are being politically exploited without bi-partisan consideration of their relation to national security? Who are the main stakeholders in this, and who are the others just articulating their opinions on the subject?

Colour Service

This is the period of mandated service to the 'colours' - a term from British times when soldiers served under the King's flag or colours – now the country's. **Indian Army strength went up from two lakh in 1939 to 25 lakh by 1945 and was down to 3.5 lakh by 1948.** So, what was the colour service then? **Prior to 1965, the minimum engagement period for army personnel in the general duty category** (of infantry, armoured corps, and artillery) **was only seven years**, while pensionable service was 15 years – which only the chosen Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) made it to. *Did the army not fight bravely, or cohesively then?* Those who would think otherwise, may like to read Philip Mason in his seminal work "*A Matter of Honour*" – prescribed reading for Cadets at the Indian Military Academy in our time. The Indian Army was the largest volunteer Army in the Commonwealth, fighting under a flag not their own, on lands not their own, led by officers of a different skin colour and language, drawing lesser pay and rations than their white British counterparts. Yet an Army which earned the highest number of gallantry awards in the Commonwealth. *Yes, it was a matter of honour.* Something the British through their recruitment and Regimental system

captured and nurtured and used. And yet, there was no talk of return to villages without pension – not even post 1962 or even after 1971. Post the Second World War, the presence of these over 20 lakh former trained soldiers, soldiers who had gone overseas and seen the world and could not be subjugated so easily, in so many villages and parts of India were also a catalyst for the eventual British decision to leave India and grant it independence.

The Standing Committee on Defence of the 14th Lok Sabha in its 34th report on Human Resource Planning, Shortage of Manpower, Infusion of Hi-Tech Training and Infrastructure for the Armed Forces submitted in Feb 2009, states that: “*Prior to 1965, Sepoys in General Duty (GD) categories were engaged for 7 years of colour service and 8 years of reserve liability. Skilled categories were engaged for 10 years with colours and 10 years reserve. The colour service has been progressively increased and it now stands at 17 years for GD (general duty) Categories. The immediate reason for increasing the terms of engagement was to expand the Army at a rapid pace post 1962*”. In fact, **it was only in Jan 1976 that the colour service was increased from 10 years to 15. After 15 years, a soldier would then retire with a monthly pension of Rs. 95.** The Rs 95 of 1981 (1976 plus 5 years) would be an inflation indexed value of Rs 1990.12 in 2024. So how do we today have monthly pensions of Jawans at over Rs 33,000? This is due to the pay commissions – especially the 6th and 7th and OROP. More of this later. **Under the system prevailing till 1976, a jawan had a colour service of ten years after which he was put on the reserve list for a further five years. As a reservist he was paid Rs. 45 a month as a retaining fee and was required to report to the army once every two years for a brief refresher course during which period he was given active service equivalent pay. Under the new scheme after 1976, the soldier will be on active service for a period of 15 consecutive years and would then be put on the reserve list for two years without having to report back for any refresher courses.** Even prior to 1976, the earlier models of (7+8) or (10+10) made such service personnel eligible for pension for life. Those who did not complete this period of 15 years due to compulsory discharge but had done the reserve duration were eligible for a reservist pension. The 4th CPC specified that the reservists’ pension will be $\frac{2}{3}$ of a reg sepoy’s pension or minimum govt pension, whichever is higher. **“The immediate reason for increasing the terms of engagement was to expand the Army at a rapid pace post 1962.”**

An Older Army Older Senior Officers. It was published in the media in 1998 that retirement ages for all Central Govt servants and Armed Forces officers were to be increased by 2 years for purpose of savings in a Pay and Pension bill that increased after recommendations of the 5th CPC were implemented. However, the savings appear to have been marginal at best after implementing the 7th CPC recommendations. But why are the Armed Forces again talking of increasing retirement ages of Armed Force personnel ostensibly to save some more. Though senior officers in 1998, who remained at the helm 2 years longer, gave some justification that ages of officers in units and of the Commanding Officer will not consequently increase, this was not logical. Even the AV Singh committee report had recommended reducing ages of Commanding Officers of units, from 41-42 years of

age to 36-37 years of age and towards this and greater promotion satisfaction, released additional promotion vacancies in two phases. In the same article, Air Marshal Savur wrote: *“Study of military history in our Defence institutions appear to dominate our thought process so much that we appear to ignore other realities of the present, even the recent past. One such is the ephemeral proposal of reducing the outgo on pay and pensions in the Defence budget by increasing the retirement age, reducing pension for those proceeding on PMR, and overall reduction in pension given that a little more than a decade ago the Army led the ‘paper battle’ for a younger Armed Forces in what ultimately became the Ajai Vikram Singh Committee recommendations of 2005.....Doesn’t it contradict the Army HQ’s determined case for more youthful Armed Forces by insisting on the speedy implementation of the Ajai Vikram Singh Committee recommendations? Does the requirement of more youthful Armed Forces no longer exist? If senior appointments are already bloated, won’t later retirements keep them in office longer?”*

Ageing Soldier Profile. The observations from studies of combat operations in Sri Lanka (1987-90) were to prophetically get reinforced in the mountains of Kargil and Siachen in 1999 during Operation VIJAY. This is reinforced by the 14th Lok Sabha’s SCOD report of 2008-09. Behera and Kaushal also write:

“Prior to 1965, the minimum engagement period for army personnel in the general duty category (of infantry, armoured corps, and artillery) was only seven years. The pensionable service being 15 years, and the colour service a mere seven, about 65 percent soldiers were retiring without a pension. **In two successive changes - one in January 1965 and the other in February 1976 - the colour service was increased to 17 years. With the minimum reckonable pensionable service remaining unchanged at 15 years, it led to almost 100 percent of retirees being eligible for pension. Thus, the number of military pensioners, which stood at 380,000 in 1950 and 600,000 in 1970, climbed to 2,680,000 in 2021. With nearly two pensioners for every serving personnel and one-fourth of the MoD’s budget being devoted to retirement benefits, even the critics of Agnipath acknowledge the problem in the growing defence pension budget. The financial burden is not the only problem created by the enhanced colour service of 17 years. It also caused the Indian military to shed some of its youthfulness. In 1992-93, submitting before the Estimates Committee of the 10th Lok Sabha, the government had confirmed that the increase in the number of years of colour service had raised the average age to 35 years for the other ranks (ORs) and 40 years for the battalion commanders. With such an aged profile, the Indian armed forces, particularly the army, stood out as an outlier in comparison to armies in different parts of the world. Writing in 2000, defence and security expert Jasjit Singh noted that with an **average age of 37 years, the Indian army was far older than its counterparts** of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) (24 years), China (about 25 years) and Pakistan (25 years). Given the adverse effects of the enhanced colour service, the need for a new personnel policy was seen as early as in the 1980s. An expert committee headed by Lt Gen K Balaram, then Vice Chief of the Indian Army, had observed in 1985 that the terms of**

engagement were the “*least cost-effective among many options that could be considered.*” Indeed, by the early 1990s, the Indian army was at an advanced stage of revising the colour service. The MoD had confirmed to the 10th Lok Sabha’s Estimates Committee that “as far as the Army colour service is concerned, we are any time awaiting the recommendation of the Chief of Army Staff. We have done a great deal of work. We referred it to the Chief of Army Staff. We are awaiting his recommendation any time now.” The need to reduce the colour service became even more pressing with the realisation that the loss of youthfulness was adversely impacting combat effectiveness. An analysis of the performance of the Indian peacekeeping force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka (1987-90) concluded that “***wherever there was a younger age group in a unit, it did better than the others.***” Regrettably, despite the problems being long known, and the army and the MoD having some sort of plan to address them, **it has taken more than 30 years to undo what was clearly a decision “imposed for short-term gains in manpower management in the 1960s and 1970s.”**

Compounding Problems – Financial Considerations. It is easily seen how the mandatory colour service increase from 7 to 15 years, increased both the average age of soldiers as well as the pension burden – even though the military or MoD may now in electoral times be disowning the latter. While older soldiers do not help battle efficiency, in the second part, the very large increase in pensioners was compounded by the pay and pensions increase of the 6th and 7th Central Pay Commissions and the OROP granted. **Since pay and pensions remain the first charge from the defence budget** (61 per cent of the MoD’s total budget in 2020-21, up from 49 per cent in 2011-12), it makes most of the defence budget go towards Revenue expenditure (routine running expenditure). The Defence Budget is 15.6% of the Central Govt Expenditure (CGE) and currently, the Army accounts for about 68.1% of the defence budget and salaries and pensions of the three services account for about 59% of the revenue budget of the three services. This leaves an inadequate amount (27.7%) balance for Capital expenditure – new procurements to keep up with changing technologies and new weapons and equipment and replacement of ageing (obsolete) weapons and equipment. ***And continuing to do more of the same will not get us different outcomes in preparation for future threats and battlefields.*** Thus, the Agnipath scheme was and is very much an imperative need of the hour as it addresses both the age reduction, as well as the pension outgo needs. Rahul Bedi writing for The Wire on 22 Jun 2022 states that “*the DMA had estimated that the saving on a solitary Agniveer who served out his full four-year term, instead of the standard 17-year ‘colour service’ undertaken by long-term inductees into the army, and their equivalents in the Indian Navy (IN) and Indian Air Force (IAF), would total to around Rs 11.5 crore, equaling a cost-cut of Rs 11,500 crore for every 1,000 PBOR*” So for say 40,000 Agniveers (actually 39,808) inducted in 2023, the savings would be Rs 4,600 crores. Behera and Kaushal put this figure at Rs 1.76 lakhs per Agniveer per year. So, for 40,000 Agniveers this would be approximately Rs 70,400 lakhs per year or Rs 2,816 crores over the four years of 60,000 Agniveer inducted in a year – which has been extrapolated from Rs 1,054 crores in 2022 to Rs 15,463 crores in 2044 when the full new induction is of Agniveers. So, even though the Govt may downplay the

financial motivation or dimension of the Agnipath scheme due to electoral considerations, these remain an important consideration, especially since the three Services are the only element of Govt, that have not transitioned from the old pension scheme to the new NPS (National Pension Scheme).

And it is not an all or nothing approach. As already stated by the Hon'ble RM, some issues can and will be tweaked as we go along with due feedback received. And there is adequate time for that, since the first batch of 18,888 Agniveers inducted in Jan 23 and second batch of 20,920 in Mar 23, will come up for their 4-year tenure end/extension only in Jan 2027. So, drawing deductions today for political purposes would be premature and not in overall interest, for it only plays into the hands of our adversaries, by sowing doubts about Govt policies and attacks the motivation of potential aspirants.

Agnipath Scheme Critical Examination

A critical examination of the scheme would reveal some important decision factors as below.

Average Soldier Age Reduction. As mentioned above, the biggest benefit of the scheme is the reduction in the average age of the Army and its cutting edge – its soldiers.

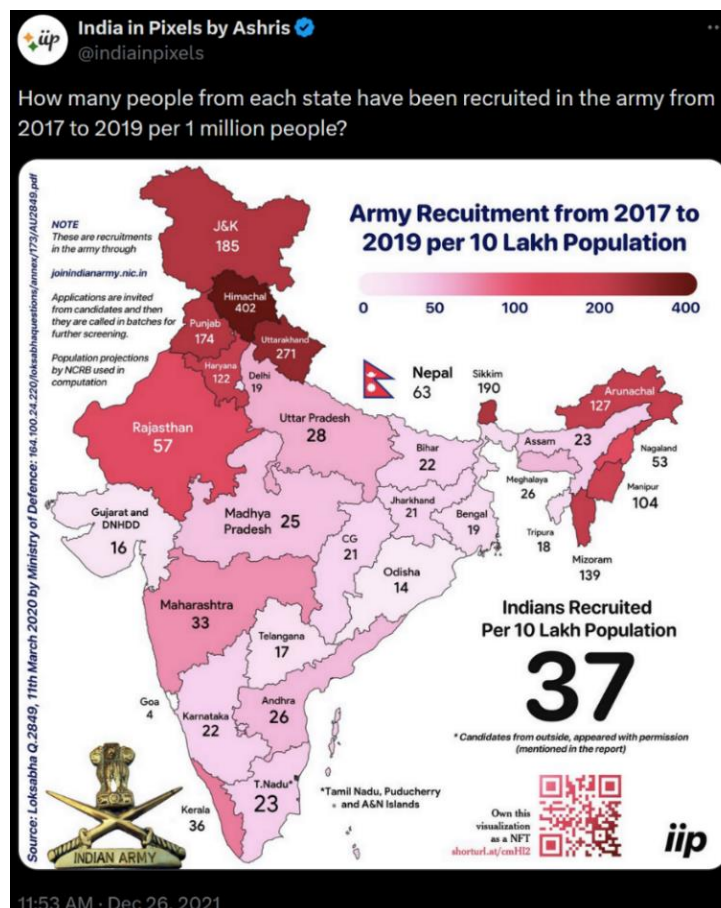
Financial Benefit. As brought out in many articles – but not acknowledged by the Govt, possibly due to electoral considerations, financial considerations have also weighed in, in the roll out of this new scheme.

Altruistic 'Nation Building' Benefits of Agnipath Scheme. There is a view that other than the known considerations that compelled the British to leave India, a contributory factor was also the lakhs of ex-servicemen all over the country who had been to foreign shores, had exposure of seeing the world beyond their villages, had weapon handling experience, were battle hardened over many years of fighting, and so were something the British had to consider in the larger consideration of whether they could continue to rule over simple village folk who had not seen much of the world beyond their villages. Similarly, it is said, that in the 1970s and 1980s, more was achieved towards family planning and family size control through awareness of the 'better life' possible, by the spread of awareness through penetration of television than by Govt schemes of family planning. In a similar corollary, when we look at 'Nation Building' and demanding of accountability from the village level upwards or percolating of the 'entrepreneurial spirit' across all the villages and districts of India, then the demobilized Agniveers would be a good base to add to such 'Nation Building' efforts, village upwards. It has also been reported that recruitment now would be spread across all 806 odd districts of India, since as per the Recruitable Male Population (RMP) model, over about 70% Army recruits came predominantly from about 170 districts of the country. Diagrammatically this Army career preference is also quite apparent, from this graphic given on 11 Mar 2020 by the MoD in reply to a Lok Sabha question. An article by Ground Report states:

“Himachal Pradesh has the highest per capita recruitment with 420 recruits/1 million Population between the years 2017 to 2019, while the figure is the lowest for Goa with 4 recruits/1 million Population. Gujarat sent roughly 16 men for every

10 lakhs of Gujaratis. By comparison, the army recruited 28 men for every 10 lakhs in Uttar Pradesh, a whopping 271 men for every 10 lakhs in Uttarakhand, and 174 men for every 10 lakhs in Punjab. Himachal Pradesh topped the table with 402 men for every 10 lakhs.”

Soldiering remains a matter of choice in India and there is no conscription. Moreover, for the Army, and also for the Navy and Air Force, recruitment is competitive. It is ‘All India, All Caste’ and there are no quotas. However, despite each state having a base of Recruitable Male Population (RMP) from its Total Male Population (TMP), if the population prefers say business opportunities to soldiering, then the Army vacancies will be filled from other states where the TMP prefers soldiering or has more martial traditions. This is only right for the country’s ‘Brahmastra’, because not only are there no runners up in war, but we also cannot adjudicate ‘bravery and a will to fight’ from academic figures and theories of equality between districts. Meaning to say, that the Nation Building benefits from the Agniveer scheme will be in proportion to the desire to fight for the country, that its volunteer RMP will exhibit from its various districts across different States, and selection must remain merit based on existing Army recruitment criteria. One must also have a sense of the scales or numbers we refer to in the Armed Forces. The **total strength of Indian Armed Forces** as ‘compiled from “Demands for Grants (2019-20)”, SCOD (2019-20), 17th Lok Sabha, 2nd Report, Lok Sabha Secretariat, December 2019’ is **14,38,717**. The **Army in 2019 had 12,28,059 personnel** (42,913 officers and 11,85,146 Personnel Below Officer Rank or PBOR); **the Navy 69,052 personnel** (10,979 officers and 58,073 sailors) **and the Air Force 1,41,606 personnel** (12,159 officers and 1,29,447 airmen). All told a total in the total Armed Forces’ strength of 14,38,717 personnel, 66,051 were officers and 13,72,666 PBOR.



5 or 4 Year Agniveer Service. Several people have written about the limited actual service an Agniveer will put in after discounting training period and leave per year. In early 2022, during iterations with the Army, the Govt had recommended a 5-year service period for Agniveers. The then Army Chief had however pegged it at four years. This could still be increased up to at least 5 years - if saving gratuity payouts beyond 5-year service is a financial consideration, as alluded by some people.

Pragmatic Retention Percentage 45-55%. In 2022 the author had shared with the Army Chief that retaining only 25% Agniveers will not work. This can easily be seen from a simple calculation from Infantry Battalions – the basic Army unit with the maximum number of Battalions. **An Infantry Battalion has a strength of 762**, of which **399 are ‘audedars’ or of rank from Naik up to Subedar Major** (1 Subedar Major; 32 Subedars; 30 Naib Subedars; 168 Havildars; and 168 Naiks) **and 363 are Sepoy/ Lance Naik**. This organisation is as per grouping for Combat after well worked out considerations for organisation for command and control, and immediate availability of next level of leadership in case of war casualties. Thus 399 of 762, or 52% of the Battalion are audedars. The balance 363 of the 762, or 48% can thus be the Agniveer pool. It has been calculated, that with annual retirement of the audedars with their mandated colour service, and with averaged out consideration of pre-mature release cases and medical categories who are boarded out of the Army for inability to serve as per Army needs, the annual exit created in the 399 audedar pool is about 40 per year. This 40 must come from the Agniveers completing their 4th year of tenure (or 5th year if we take a 5-year model). Thus, of the 363 Agniveer pool in an Infantry Battalion, in a 4-year tenure model, each Battalion will get about 91 Agniveers per year ($363/4=90.75$ or 91). In a 5-year Agniveer tenure model this will be $363/5=72.6$ or 73 per year). The 5-year model is also what Bharat Karnad recommended in an article in July 2018.

Two Retention Percentage Possibilities. There are thus two retention percentage possibilities with a 4-year Agniveer tenure or a 5-year Agniveer tenure. In both these, the combat edge, or the ‘non-audedar’ Agniveers will be 48% of the fighting strength and will be of an average of 18-22 years old.

- (a) **Option I – 4 Year Agniveer Tenure.** Each Infantry Battalion will in this get 91 Agniveers per year. With four Rifle Companies of 116 men each and a SP and HQ Company and Bn HQ, if all first year Agniveers only come to Rifle Companies and then in their 2nd year onwards as per aptitude move to SP or HQ Company or Battalion HQs, then each year each Rifle Company will have a $91/4=23$ new Agniveer turnover. With three fighting platoons, each platoon will get 7 new Agniveers each year and each of the platoon’s three rifle sections will have 2 of its 10 soldiers as new Agniveers each year and the platoon HQ one Agniveer. This is manageable. While this is viable, the 4-year model will need a $40/91$ or 44% Agniveer retention figure to get 40 audedars annually from the 91 Agniveers inducted.

- (b) **Option II – 5 Year Agniveer Tenure.** Each Infantry Battalion will in this get 73 Agniveers per year. As above, if all first year Agniveers only come to Rifle Companies, then each year each Rifle Company will have a $73/4=18$ new Agniveer turnover. With three fighting platoons per Company, each platoon will get 6 new Agniveers each year and each of the Platoon's three rifle sections will have 2 of its 10 soldiers as new Agniveers each year. This is manageable. While this is viable, the 5-year model will need a 40/73 or 55% Agniveer retention figure to get 40 audedars annually from the 73 Agniveers inducted.
- (c) **Recommended Option – 5 Year Model.** The 5-year Agniveer tenure model, with a 55% retention may be the best model to have going forward which will meet the Army's requirement, as well as Agniveers' aspirations more optimally.
- (d) **Tailor Made Calculations.** Each unit is authorised its manpower as per combat requirements and the audedars percentage in each is thus marginally different. The different units, as well as the overall Agniveer retention percentages can thus easily be calculated once the 4 or 5 year term of Agniveer employment is finalised. Such calculations are internal to the Army, and the Govt would just need to approve a retention percentage for each unique Arm or service – so that Agniveers can build up on their 4 or 5 years' experience by 44% or 55% absorption in the same type of unit/ Regiment. This is easily doable and a win-win situation for both the Army and the Agniveers.
- (e) **Govt Agnipath Scheme Review Statement.** The Hon'ble RM has already stated that "*the government is open to change in the Agnipath scheme if required, and the future of youths joining as Agniveers will not be impacted*". The Army is now reportedly doing an 'internal survey' on the scheme.

Retaining Army Core Strength. The Battalion is the Army's basic fighting unit. Even if anyone has not read Philip Mason's '*A Matter of Honour*', a conversation with a Veteran (ex-serviceman) will easily reveal how in fighting arms (Armoured Corps, Infantry and Mechanised Infantry), the unit is the nursery for incubating fighting spirit and motivating the soldier to blindly follow any order in defence of our motherland – and then some more. '*Buddies*', '*unit ki izzat*', '*naam, namak and nishan*' and the like are all part of this motivational cocktail. The British had recognised this very well and this system of nurturing unit cohesion has stood the test of time over hundreds of years. That is why, in fighting units (also in some supporting Arms such as the Artillery, Engineers and Air Defence Artillery) unlike in services and MHA organisations (PMOs or CPOs), soldiers and officers largely spend their entire service in the same unit with the same buddies, ready to fight together. Unit and identity cohesion ensues. There is thus well-founded apprehension that the Agniveer Scheme and its new recruitment policy, will dilute this core strength of our fighting units. This need is incidentally peculiar to the Army, since the Navy (ships are the basic unit) and Air Force (planes flown by officers and Air Defence and logistics elements) have rotating personnel akin to the Army's services.

Feedback from Punjab and Haryana. Interaction with some officers in recruiting organisations in Punjab reveals that they are finding it very difficult to meet recruiting targets post the Agniveer scheme. The argument given by parents often is that if there is no job and pension assurance, then why should their wards serve in the Army for 4 years? They say that if today they can spend Rs 20 lakhs to send their wards abroad, then why should they wait for 4 years to do this, even if the amount after 4 years may be only 10 lakhs (with 10 lakhs coming from the Agniveer's own savings – seva nidhi)? In these 4 years, they feel their wards would be better settled abroad. There is thus an imperative to meet the organisation aim of age and financial outgo reduction but also put in place the earlier 'assured Govt job' factors, to again make the Army an attractive career option. Yes, we are still getting adequate numbers for our recruitment rallies, but anyone conducting these will share, that recruit selection post Agniveer, is from a lesser pool of candidates, with many good potential candidates not opting. Just as the many MoD submissions to various SCODs over the years, making the army a more attractive career option for officers – and now Agniveers too, must be dealt with urgently. The need to retain unit identities and cohesion from within overall Army recruitment, will also be addressed if these issues causing certain sections of our population to not opt for the Army are taken care of by 50-55% Agniveer retention and assured adjustment of the balance in 'Govt' jobs as already promised. The 10% quota in the 10 lakhs plus Para Military Forces (PMF) and Central Police Organisations (CPOs) will be adequate to cater for this, once the Govt promulgates orders for their absorbing 21-22 years old Agniveers. The balance Agniveers if not opting for these, can also be adjusted in the other Central and State Govt opportunities assured for them.

Recruitable Male Population (RMP) Consideration. Yes, our Army is "*All India All Class*". However, as per the background note submitted by the MoD to the 14th Lok Sabha's SCOD, within this its units fall into four types: *One Class; Fixed Class; Mixed Class* and *All India All Class*. RMP is that proportion of the male population, which meets the Qualitative Recruitments (QR) laid down for recruitment. RMP, based on the ages of entry and qualification, was computed in 1966 as 11.7 % of the Total Male Population (TMP). This percentage was rounded off to 10 percent for ease of calculation. RMP varies from State to State. The current RMP in the Army is based on the 2001 census.

Alternate 'Govt' Job Options. Everyone wants the security of a Govt job. In the case of MHA's PMF and CPOs, and other Govt services, the retirement age is 60 years and career progression (pay and pensions) are also better than corresponding Army soldiers. Army soldiers, conversely, even with 17 years colour service will be retired at 35 years of age unless promoted to '*audedars*' – the lucky 31%. Then why should anyone join the Army – other than for '*desh bhakti and izzat*'. Even the MoD in their background note submitted to the 14th Lok Sabha's SCOD in 2008 had stated: "*It is an acknowledged fact that the best youth today are not joining the Armed Forces. The old values of patriotic feelings, family tradition and adventurous life which drove hordes of youth to join the Armed Forces earlier are giving way to the values of a materialistic world and other environment factors.*" There is no doubt therefore, that to

attract and retain talent worthy of making India's Brahmastra truly capable, not only do we need to retain 55% of the Agniveers, but we also need to give the balance 45% a proper Govt job assurance post lateral absorption after their Agniveer tenure.

What is Good for Officers is Good for Soldiers. It cannot be anyone's argument that what is good for the Army's officer cadre - incentives, promotion prospects, terms of service etc, is not good for its soldiers. Therefore, when the MoD, the Army, and various studies such as the AV Singh or Kargil Review Committee or the Group of Ministers (GoM) Report argue that we must increase the (non-pensionable) 'Short Service Cadre' of commissioned officer entry, and commensurately reduce the permanent commission entry, the same would also hold true for our soldiers. Even within the officer cadre, to reinforce the availability of officers for the Infantry in its field area soldiering, we have a system of newly commissioned/ young officers from the services doing a few years of mandatory service with the Infantry in field areas before they go to their own service for regular soldiering in their allotted service. The Agniveer scheme too is a step in the same direction.

UN Mission Selections versus Choice for Combat. When choosing soldiers for lucrative UN Mission assignments, the Army has stringent selection criteria promulgated in the form of a transparent SOP (Standard Operating Procedure). Soldiers who have an adverse disciplinary record (punishments awarded) or are low medical categories (unless battle casualties), are not eligible for UN deployment. So, while they are not good enough when the Army puts its best foot forward for UN deployments, are they good enough for defence of our country? Why not retain similar meritorious criteria for defence of our country as well? For our 'Brahmastra'. Those who have been in service know the difference between soldiers. Every unit has a small number, who have just come for the salary and pension and may not be the bests of soldiers to take to battle, or as medical categories are not fit for it, but are carried along since no one wants to deny them (and so their families) their pensionable service. It is these few soldiers, who may not have the interest or aptitude or physical fitness over time, who can be moved out of active soldiering post their Agniveer tenure into other assignments where their skills can be more gainfully employed, without compromising on the Army's combat capabilities.

Army not a Welfare Organisation. A corollary of the above, unlike other Govt organisations, the Army is not a welfare organisation, since each combatant soldier must account for himself on the battlefield, and we can carry no weak link to battle. It is in keeping with this, that unlike in other Govt Departments, if any soldier dies in harness, his next of kin are not automatically given a Govt job in the Army. Army soldier and officer selection remains on merits as per Army recruitment criteria. And we are proud of the fact that some next of kin after bereavement, have, with guidance and encouragement from the Army, made it to officer rank by competitive enrolment in various officer academies.

Reducing Soldier Suicides. *"Between 100 and 140 soldiers have died ever year of "suicide/self-inflicted injuries" since 2001, the Indian Army said."* In fact, *"Over the last*

seven years, almost 800 Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel in the Indian military have died by suicide... India currently has more than 14 lakh personnel in its armed forces, out of which the Army lost 591 soldiers to suicide; 36 people died from suicide in the Navy, and the Indian Air Force reported 160 deaths by suicide, the Minister of Defence Shripad Naik noted in a written reply in the Rajya Sabha.... It was earlier reported that between 2010 and 2019, more than 1,100 Indian defense personnel died by suicide, with the Indian Army recording the most cases. By one estimate, one jawan dies by suicide every third day....Family and conflict-related trauma contribute to personnel's mental health....Difficulty in tackling family problems — like marital issues, financial concerns, property disputes, and more - from a distance may also contribute to the mental health strain of jawans, the government says.” The death by suicide of a trained soldier on an average once every three days is indeed a cause of worry. In most cases a major contributory factor has been found to be stresses associated with nuclear families and the marital pressures in joint families or other dependencies when the soldiers are out in field tenures or are not able to be home when needed, but yet the family pressures reach them through their mobiles. When the cases are examined, they are mostly found to be of personnel below officer rank. Other than the greater hardship personnel in these ranks face at home with limited help when not in a supportive joint family, a contributory factor may even be the mental resilience of the concerned soldier, even though the Army does endeavour to create 'buddy pair' support systems and regular monitoring and feedback within barracks and sub-units. Unlike for officers, the men do not currently have psychological testing and evaluation (part of SSB or Services Selection Board testing) prior formulation of the merit list. While actions are at hand to ameliorate the causatory issues, there is no denying the fact that with a larger percentage of soldiers being younger (unmarried) Agniveers, it is probable the stresses older married soldiers undergo, and consequent suicide rates would be lesser. This can only be good for soldiers as well as for the Army. Moreover, while entry level psychological testing may not have taken place, four years of close behavioural observation within units, will assist in retaining the mentally more resilient soldiers.

Agniveer Feedback. Supported by the MoD, the services have put in a lot of effort in upgrading recruit training and incorporating simulators and other training aids. Selection criteria have also been tweaked to benefit from available talent capabilities. For instance, for drivers, now the Army recruits those who know how to drive and have a driving license, rather than recruiting those who do not know driving and then spending six months imparting driving training to them. Feedback from units about the performance, and even more the keenness and enthusiasm of the Agniveers who have joined is very encouraging. The Army also has in place a very stringent and transparent assessment system to select the best Agniveers for retention. In any case, though assessment is in place and ongoing, as mentioned, the call for the first batch of Agniveers of Jan 2023, for their retention board, is still some years away and we have sufficient time for formal Army feedback and adoption of the required correctives, whether in 4 or 5 year employment term or in retention percentage, or even in formalizing other Govt employment opportunities for those not part of the 44% or 55% eventually to be selected for retention. One aspect is however, clear. Earlier fighting units were stuck with the recruit draft that came till they completed their colour service

and went home on pension. It was like a regular Govt job. Now the Damocles sword of performance, physical fitness and meeting of professional benchmarks will be a big motivator, and the difference in young soldier enthusiasm is already visible in units.

Ideal National Solution. As recommended by earlier Committees, the ideal solution would be for the over 10 lakh troops of the PMF and CPOs to first do an Agniveer stint with the Army and then at 21-22 years of age go to their parent PMF or CPO fully trained. Not only will this provide better trained manpower to the PMFs and CPOs, but it will also greatly synergise mutual understanding and training between elements of the MoD and MHA. In tomorrow's battlefield, where the fourth and fifth estates merge with social media warriors from across borders, influencing opinions and actions with plausible deniability, having more trained and aware forces with lateral synergy between MoD and MHA forces – all equally organs of the State, can only be to national security benefit. Even the Agniveers who choose to retire to their homes for other opportunities, will be potent enablers of national effort when the need arises. Some countries already have this model in place. In Italy for example, the Carabinieri (Armed Police), train with and under the aegis of the Italian Army, with whom they also do annual refresher courses. In any war, or terrorist situation or National Emergency, the Carabinieri immediately functions alongside and under the Italian Army and there is full and seamless synergy in understanding and procedures amongst both these organs of State. In our context, despite any number of SCOD and Committee recommendations, we have not even been able to reduce the number of civil service exam papers and make some eligibility concessions for our Short Service officers as done for the Emergency Commission officers post the 1962 war. Officers who went on to have very successful stints in the IAS and IPS. What we thus need against inherent turf protection tendencies by various organisations against whom the MoD too has expressed helplessness in presentations to the SCOD, is similar Govt resolve in passing orders for these actions of lateral absorption akin to the boldness shown in implementing the Agniveer scheme. *And what we definitely do not need is political parties promising to roll back the Agniveer Scheme on the alter of electoral opportunism. Rather, in a bi-partisan manner they should be alongwith the Govt be brainstorming the changes recommended, such as of increasing the retention percentage to 55%, the tenure to five years and facilitatory lateral absorption orders. Or possibly even the best and most difficult order of getting PMFs and CPOs to do their first four years as Agniveers with the Army and after getting a satisfactory report, to thereafter go to their parent PMF/ CPO organisation for further service.* That will be a game changing and transformative order - if turf protection resistance and counter arguments generated, can be overcome and firm orders passed.

Synergising Public Expenditures and more Accountable Decision Making. Once the above is in place, as recently recommended by the NSA in an address, we should think in terms of synergising our weapon and ammunition procurements for MoD and MHA constituents. The economies of scale, reduction in carrying costs of inventory, and seamless synergy that will obtain in times of conflict can only be good for the Nation. If this were not to happen or were to take inordinately long due to procrastinated decision making, then time bound accountability for the concerned

decision makers should also be established. The country cannot wait longer, just like the potential adversary at our Northern and Western borders, will not wait for us to first get this act of ours together prior creating further mischief or escalation.

Conclusion

In concluding, one is convinced that the Agniveer scheme is an essential scheme which was needed for over the past 25-30 years, but never implemented by any Govt. Now that this has been done, other than the age reduction and financial savings that will accrue, there will be great professional and capability accretion benefit that will also accrue for the Army once the retention percentage is revised. Units will also have a higher percentage of 'fit' persons ready for battle, while the revenue and capital budgets are 'right sized' for the more technically advanced battlefield requirements of tomorrow. It is strongly recommended the scheme be viewed from a nationalistic lens on the factors mentioned above – amongst possibly other factors too, and not be addressed from a politically expedient percept only to gain populist brownie points. On National Security issues, it is not '*my party right or wrong*', but "***Our Country Right or Wrong***".

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