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Agnipath scheme has led to an acute shortfall in manpower

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ADVERSE IMPACT: Agniveers feel that those released will bear the stigma of being discards. ANI



Maj Gen GG Dwivedi (retd)

ANY systemic transformation that relies on ‘after the fact’ mechanism to rectify errors is inherently flawed. The Agnipath scheme stands out as one such example. The scheme was ceremoniously rolled out two years ago. Touted to transform the recruitment process of ‘personnel below officer rank’ (PBOR), it has sought to cut down the burgeoning pension bill and ensure a youthful profile of other ranks in the armed forces.

The scheme has faced resistance from young aspirants passionate to join the armed forces. Periodically, it has been in the news and, of late, there is a strong demand across the spectrum for its holistic review.

The Agnipath idea draws from the 'Tour of Duty' (ToD) concept, which is widely prevalent in Western armies to overcome the shortage of optants for the military service. It was Gen Bipin Rawat, then Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), who conceived the idea of introducing ToD in our armed forces. The original plan was to test-bed the proposal by recruiting small numbers. However, the scheme was apparently pushed through unilaterally. It is evident from the reported disclosures in the book Four Stars of Destiny by a former Chief of Army Staff, Gen MM Naravane, wherein he describes the scheme as a 'bolt from the blue' for the three services.

Currently, under the scheme, Agniveers in the age group of 17.5 to 21 years and with Class X/XII qualification are recruited for a period of four years after six months of training. Only 25 per cent of them are to be retained and re-enrolled for a period of 15 years on fresh terms of service, with entitlement to pension and post-retirement benefits. Those released are to be given a severance package — Seva Nidhi — of Rs 10 lakh.

The total number of defence pensioners is about 24.62 lakh; of them, armed forces veterans constitute around 19 lakh and civilians 5.62 lakh. Going by the figures of 2022, when the Agnipath scheme was introduced, the defence budget wasRs 5,25,166 crore, of which the pension outlay was Rs 2,07,132 crore. While the share of defence personnel stood at Rs 1,19,696 crore, the civilian component was Rs 87,436 crore, the latter accounting for a disproportionate 40 per cent share of the pensionary budget.

The adverse impact of the scheme is evident from the fact that individuals seeking an honourable career in the armed forces, many in keeping with family traditions, are now looking for alternative avenues, with the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) being the top choice. I have witnessed this trend in my home state of Punjab. There is also a general feeling among the Agniveers that those released will bear the stigma of being discards and not be seen as proud veterans. Given the high rate of unemployment, particularly among the youth, the released Agniveers are unlikely to get a decent job; the idea of lateral placement into the CAPF is far-fetched.

Recently, there were two instances of Agniveers who made the supreme sacrifice while deployed in operational areas. Their kin were entitled to only a lump sum compensation as against those of the regular soldiers who are eligible for full pension. This discrimination stands out as a serious anomaly.

In the units today, there are two categories of soldiers: the regulars and the Agniveers. There is an unhealthy competition and obvious stress among the Agniveers in their quest to qualify for retention. It is indeed detrimental to the camaraderie and esprit de corps, the bedrock of unit culture and regimentation, the cutting edge of our armed forces as against the better-equipped adversaries. Incidentally, the performance of 'tourist soldiers' has been found wanting — be it Americans in Vietnam and Afghanistan, Israelis in Gaza and troops in the Russia-Ukraine war. Even the Chinese army conscripts have performed poorly in Ladakh during the ongoing standoff.

Agnipath has led to an acute shortfall in manpower; while the yearly retirement count is around 70,000, the Agniveer intake is just 42,000. With 25 per cent retention, the deficiency is set to grow further. The recruitment of Gorkhas has taken the maximum hit as 60 per cent of the manpower of 39 Gorkha battalions comes from 'Nepal Domicile Gorkha'. The Nepal Government's rejection of Agnipath has serious implications. Chinese overtures to recruit Gorkhas can't be ruled out. Indian youth joining foreign militaries is a worrying trend; the case in point is the recent reports of some persons lured to join the Russian army.

There are reports that the Agnipath scheme is under review and there is likelihood of an increase in the percentage of retentions and extension of the years of service for the Agniveers. Given that the scheme suffers from serious drawbacks, minor tweaking isn't going to serve a worthwhile purpose. It is prudent that the previous system be fine-tuned, making the recruitment process more scientific and stringent. The fallacy of bringing down the age profile from around 32 to 26 does not hold ground as fitness encompasses both physical and mental health. It takes six-seven years to produce an all-round soldier; besides individual ruggedness tends to peak towards the late 20s and early 30s. Incidentally, the fitness of the CAPF personnel who are manning the disputed borders with median age over 42 years has never been questioned.

The pension bill can be considerably reduced by resorting to rightsizing of the armed forces and defence civilian organisations. For example, the Defence Research and

Development Organisation (DRDO) has a strength of around 30,000 alongside 10,000 contractual workers and 50-odd labs. The recent recommendations of the Vijay Raghavan Committee to restructure and downsize the DRDO is a step in the right direction. A similar exercise is required for the 41 ordnance factories, employing around 80,000 workers.

The resilience of a system lies in its ability to undo a wrong. Hope the military hierarchy will scrap the Agnipath scheme in the larger organisational interest, setting aside all other considerations.