

The Agnipath Scheme of the Government of India: A Dilemma for Nepal

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Abstract

The Agnipath Scheme was unveiled by the Government of India on June 14, 2022. It plans to recruit *Agniveers* for a period of four years, after which only 25 percent would be retained in the service, and the rest would be demobilized with an amount of INR 1.17 million. The laid-off *Agniveers* will not be entitled to pension and other benefits provided for defence pensioners. This plan mainly aims at lowering the average age of the Indian military and reducing defence expenditure. The introduction of the new scheme has put Nepal into a dilemma as to whether or not to allow its citizens to join the Indian Army as provisioned by the 1947 Tripartite Agreement. This is a complex issue and needs to be analyzed from economic, social, political, diplomatic and security perspectives before making a decision. There are pros and cons on either side. Therefore, a dispassionate and pragmatic decision needs to be taken following in-depth discussions and analyses.

Keywords: Agnipath scheme, tripartite agreement, defence, treaty, gorkha recruitment

Introduction

The Government of India announced the Agnipath Scheme on 14 June 2022. It would apply to all of the three services of the armed forces (army, air force and navy). Under the Scheme, all new entrants (called *Agniveer*) would be recruited for a period of four years. After four years, one-fourth (25 per cent) of the *Agniveers* would be retained in the service as regulars, and three-fourths (75 per cent) would be demobilized and sent home with a fixed amount of money deposited in the 'Sevanidhi package'. The age limit to be enrolled under the Agnipath Scheme would be from 17.5 to 21 years (The Indian Express, 2022).

As announced by the Government of India, the monthly pay for the *Agniveers* would be INR 30 thousand for the first year of service, 33 thousand for the second year, 36 thousand five hundred for the third year and 40 thousand for the fourth

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year. Out of this amount, an amount of 9 to 12 thousand (9 thousand in the 1st year to 12 thousand in the fourth year) would be deducted and an equivalent amount would be contributed by the Government of India (Arora, 2023). This amount would be deposited into the “Sevanidhi account”. After four years, the demobilized *Agniveers* would receive a perk of INR 11.71 lakh, which constitutes the amount contributed by the *Agniveers*, the government, and the interests accrued from the Sevanidhi account. Such *Agniveers* would not qualify for a pension, nor other welfare services arranged by the Government of India for its defence pensioners such as the Ex-servicemen Health Scheme (ECHS) or facility of purchases from the military’s Canteen Stores Department (CSD). Nor will they be accorded the “ex-servicemen” status (Drishtias, 2023).

There seem to be two major triggers for the Agnipath Scheme. The first is the preference for a “more youthful military” to deal with the country’s security threats. Several expert committees and commissions have recommended making the military more youthful. It may be noted that the present average age of the Indian military is 32-33 years as compared to such age in some other countries (26-27 years in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Israel, Russia and China) (Kaushal, 2023). By 2044, when all the current regulars retire, the average age of the Indian military may come down to around 27 years.

The second justification could be financial. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh is quoted as having said, “We never see the army from the point of view of savings”. Behera and Kaushal, however, have estimated that through the Agnipath Scheme, the Government of India could save up to INR 15463 crore (Kaushal, 2023).

The Scheme invited public ire after its announcement resulted in violent protests and demonstrations in various parts of India. Some veterans questioned the scheme itself. Political leaders, especially in the opposition, criticized the decision of the Government. Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the Congress Party, slammed the government for making such a decision. In a post on Instagram, Gandhi wrote: “The government has destroyed the dreams of countless youths by canceling the permanent recruitment process of the Army and the Indian Air Force under the guise of the *Agniveer* scheme, which was brought in to provide ‘temporary recruitment’,” (The Economic Times, 23 December 2023). General M. M. Naravane, the Indian Army chief during the unveiling of the Scheme, is reported as having written in his memoir that the Agnipath Scheme came as a surprise for the Indian air force and the Navy, like a “bolt from the blue” (The Wire, 2023).

Whatever the initial reactions and protests against the scheme, the Government of India has clarified that the scheme would not be withdrawn. India’s National Security Advisor Ajit Doval said that there was “no question of rollback of Agnipath

scheme; government's move is not a knee-jerk reaction.” (Times T. E., 2022). The initial public wrath has by now largely receded, and the scheme has come into implementation as planned.

The Agnipath Scheme and Nepal

The Agnipath Scheme has become a subject of debate in Nepal. Around 32 thousand Nepali citizens are serving in the Indian Army (Embassy of India, Kathmandu, 2024). The 1947 tripartite Memorandum of Agreement between Nepal, India and the UK provides the legal basis for Indian and the British Army to recruit Nepali citizens. The Government of Nepal had approached the British Government for a revision of the 1947 agreement, but no such proposal has been made with India.

Nepalis have been serving in the Indian Army since 1815. The East India Company rulers were highly impressed by the bravery and war skills of the Nepalis during the 1814-15 Nepal-British India war. They recruited about 5000 Nepali soldiers and made them fight alongside other Indian soldiers in Nepal (Pathak, 2022). The loyalty of these Nepali soldiers impressed the British, and they continued hiring Nepalis for their army in India. After the independence of India in August 1947, a tripartite agreement was signed between Nepal, India and the UK on November 9, 1947. Article 4 of the Memorandum of Agreement says “The Government of Nepal...hereby signify their agreement to the employment of Gorkha troops in the armies of the United Kingdom and of India” (Bhasin, 1994). India and the UK still refer to this agreement while talking about Nepali soldiers in their armies (India, 2024). The Government of Nepal on February 12, 2020, officially requested the UK Government for a review of the 1947 tripartite agreement (The Kathmandu Post, 17 February 2020). Similarly, former Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali is quoted as having said that the Gorkha recruitment was “a legacy from the past” and terming the 1947 tripartite agreement “redundant” (Pathak, 2022).

After the Agnipath Scheme came into implementation, an Indian recruiting team reached Butwal in Nepal to select Nepali candidates for the Indian army (Ethirajan, 2023). The Government of Nepal asked the Indian side to suspend the process for the time being. Nepal's Foreign Minister Dr. Narayan Khadka called Indian Ambassador to Nepal, Manjeev Singh Puri, and made the request, which was complied with by the Indian side. Initially, the Nepali side stated that the new Government to be formed after the parliamentary elections of November 20, 2022, would decide on this matter. However, even after a year of the formation of a new government, no decision has been taken by the Nepali side and the recruitment of Nepali citizens in the Indian Army is on hold. The Nepali people are divided on the issue of whether or not Nepal should allow its citizens to join the Indian Army under the Agnipath Scheme.

The Reference Points

The issue of Nepalis joining the Indian Army under the Agnipath Scheme is a complicated one, and, before making a decision, requires an in-depth analysis of a number of aspects associated with it. The issue needs to be analyzed from economic, social, political, diplomatic and security perspectives.

The Gorkha recruitment carries great importance from an economic perspective. The earnings of the serving Nepalis and the pensions of about 127,000 pensioners bring over 60 billion rupees into the country annually (Times, 2023). This also helps in the foreign currency earnings for Nepal. The employment in the Indian army also ensures a great deal of financial stability in the family of the soldier. A Gorkha soldier serving in the Indian Army reportedly “supports nearly 15-20 family members with his salary” (Chauhan, 2023). Thus, the Agnipath Scheme and the dilemma of the Government of Nepal over it have created a situation in which “the economy of one country, and the security of another are at stake (Times, 2023).

From the social point of view, those serving in the Indian army and their family members command high respect in Nepali society. Their houses can be identified from a distance, and their families enjoy a distinct lifestyle. Many parents of the matching community aspire to marry off their daughters to the *Lahures* (soldiers in the Indian Army). The lenders in the society readily lend money to their families. Thus, enrollment in the Indian Army guarantees social respect. Besides, many programs have been run by the Government of India for the welfare of the pensioners. Such programs have contributed to improving the life of the pensioners and their families and the society as a whole.

This issue should be seen from an employment perspective as well. It must be recognized that a sizeable number of Nepalis have been employed by the Indian Army which has contributed to lessening unemployment in the country as well as improving the living standards of many individuals and families in the society.

The Agnipath Scheme darkens some spots in this rosy picture. Under the present arrangements, three-fourths of those recruited under the scheme will be demobilized after four years. What will be their future? Those going for recruitment early, say at the age of 17 years and a half will have left their education incomplete. How will it impact their future life? Some ministries and agencies of the Government of India have announced reservations of a certain number of their vacancies for demobilized *Agniveers*, but this applies only to Indian citizens, not to Nepalis (NDA, 2022). Thus, those returning home after four years will have an uncertain future before them.

The matter of the Gorkha recruitment has evolved as a political issue in Nepal. There is a section in Nepali society that opposes Gorkha recruitment as a whole. They oppose the recruitment of Nepalis in the Indian Army, the British Army as well as Singapore Police Force. They ask why Nepalis should be sent to serve other countries in the form of ‘mercenaries’ and shed blood for others. They understand this issue as a national shame that needs to be stopped outright (Chhina, 2022). They have taken the Agnipath Scheme as a good opportunity for stopping Gorkha recruitment at least with India for the moment.

The diplomatic component of the Gorkha recruitment is one of the most important aspects of the system as a whole. The Nepali soldiers provide a very strong link to the age-old friendly ties between Nepal and India. The Nepali soldiers have sacrificed their lives for the security of India. Their contribution has been recognized and greatly appreciated by the government and the people of India. Addressing the Constituent Assembly of Nepal on August 3, 2014, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi represented the views of the whole of India when he said, “All the wars that India has won, have witnessed Nepali blood being shed, and Nepalis attaining martyrdom defending India. I salute the Nepali braves who have laid down their lives for India” (Modi, 2014).

The relationship between the Nepali Army and the Indian Army is truly exemplary. Only those who have seen it personally can feel the warmth of this relationship. The Army Chiefs of both countries are awarded with the honorary rank of General of the other army. The Nepali people have witnessed, and appreciated, the humanitarian assistance activities of the Indian Army during natural disasters in Nepal as well as the assistance of the Government of India in the modernization of the Nepali Army. The Gorkha Brigade of the Indian Army and the contribution the Nepali soldiers have made to India are among the most important factors for such goodwill and cooperation.

It must also be acknowledged that the Agnipath Scheme contains some problem areas, especially for the Nepalis. The uncertain future of the early retirees has been mentioned above. Another concern for Nepal and the Nepali people is the possible use/misuse of the returnees by unscrupulous elements, both within and outside the country. These returnees, who are militarily trained, skilled to use modern and sophisticated weapons, physically strong but not much educated, and without an employment may be the first targets for such elements. If they are seduced to join such elements or even terrorist organizations, they may be a great challenge for the country and the international community. It is not appropriate to shrug these problem areas off. Some people in Nepal suggest that the early returnees may run their small businesses with the money they get from the Sevanidhi package. Others

say that they may easily get jobs in security agencies within the country or abroad. However, it needs to be accepted that the challenges and uncertainties that the early returnees face are far more daunting than what can be visualized at this stage.

A dispassionate analysis of all the aspects of the Agnipath Scheme leads to a serious dilemma for Nepal. Should Nepali citizens be allowed to join the Indian Army under the scheme or should the Government of Nepal stop the Gorkha recruitment and terminate the 1947 tripartite Memorandum of Agreement? The Government of India and most people there want to continue recruiting brave Nepalis in their Army. The Spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs expressed hope to continue recruiting Nepalis in the Indian Army. Other people in India too have expressed similar views. Some analysts and practitioners in India have even proposed some solutions to address the concerns of Nepal and the Nepali people. Ashok Mehta, a retired Major General of the Indian Army, has suggested that the Government of India needs to make some revisions to the scheme. He has suggested two such revisions: increase the service period for demobilization from four to seven years and demobilize only fifty per cent of the *Agniveers* after seven years (Mehta, 2023). Former Ambassador of India to Nepal, Ranjit Rae, has suggested that the reservations made by other ministries and agencies be applicable to Nepali soldiers as well (Rae, 2023).

Conclusion

The question of Nepalis joining the Agnipath Scheme has become a double-edged sword for Nepal. It has opportunities and challenges on both sides. Therefore, the Government of Nepal needs to give this matter dispassionate consideration. When the Government of Nepal asked the Indian side to suspend the recruitment, there were expectations that a new Government to be formed after the elections of November 2022 would take a decision, possibly with a consensus among major political parties. However, the new government has not yet made this issue an agenda for discussion. It should be kept in mind that indecision in this case cannot be a solution. The sooner the Government of Nepal decides on this matter, the better. The views expressed in Nepal are divided; but most academicians, analysts and practitioners are in favor of the continuation of the Gorkha recruitment. They fear that Nepal-India relations will not remain the same if Nepal terminates the Gorkha recruitment system. If such a vacuum is created, they fear, it would be detrimental not only to the interests of Nepal but also may threaten the security of India.

At this stage, there may be three options available for the Nepali side. The first is to let Nepali citizens join the Agnipath Scheme as announced by the Government of India. The youths aspiring to join the Indian Army under the scheme will themselves consider all the aspects before deciding whether to join or not.

Second, the Government of Nepal may request the Government of India to make some concessionary revisions to the scheme. The revisions may be in the line of suggestions discussed above. If the revisions are made, Nepalis may be allowed to join. Otherwise, the recruitment could be stopped forever. The third alternative is to reject the Agnipath Scheme altogether, and terminate the 1947 tripartite Memorandum of Agreement. Whatever decision is taken, the Government of Nepal must seriously consult all the stakeholders, and take a dispassionate and pragmatic decision after thorough discussions and consultations.

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