

## Note

# The Current Affairs & Strategic Analysis Forum (CASA)

## Webinar on Agnipath Scheme Held on 28 June 2022

Under the guidance of the founders of CASA, Lt Gen Gautam Moorthy, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd) ex DG Ordnance Services and Lt Gen P R Shankar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd) ex DG Artillery, CASA held a well-attended webinar on the Agnipath Scheme, that had been launched by Government of India on 14 June 2022 in the presence of the Honorable Raksha Mantri, the three Service Chiefs, the Def Secretary, the Officiating Secretary Department of Military Affairs and others.

The panellists who presented their views were:-

1. Air Marshal Anil Chopra, PVSM, AVSM, VM, VSM (Retd)
2. Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia, PVSM, AVSM, SM (Retd)
3. Vice Admiral Anil Chopra, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)

The moderator for the discussion was Lt Gen P R Shankar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd).

Between them, the panelists and the moderator had over 120 years of combined experience in the Armed Forces, on land, sea and air, besides extensive combat experience from command

of units, ships and squadrons, and also at the highest echelons of the three Services.

The main highlights of the presentations and the observations of the moderator included the following:-

- The scheme serves to uplift the structure while not fully meeting the aspirations of the youth and not actually enhancing combat effectiveness.
- All were agreed on the need to lower the age profile of the cutting edge of our units, ships and squadrons to maintain the operational edge of our armed forces over our adversaries. While a healthy mix of youth and experience is desirable, calculations reveal that after 2028, Agniveers will outnumber the experienced hands which would also include Low Medical Categories.
- All were agreed on the need to lower the outgo from the annual defence budget towards pensions that had shown a sharp spike when the OROP was implemented in Feb 2016 but has been declining since then.
- All the speakers and most participants during the Question & Answers session of the webinar were unanimous in their view that the 4 year tenure and the 6 month training period were too short for the Agniveers to form any useful fighting component in units. The risk of them being assigned to inconsequential duties and the formation of two distinct classes amongst the soldiers- the regulars and the Agniveers was very high and would be detrimental to operational effectiveness. Some of the other drawbacks in the scheme that emerged during the webinar were:-

- a. The scheme attempts to change the man-machine equation too rapidly without adequate preparation. In the platform centric military of the future this will have an adverse impact on the war fighting and winning capabilities of our armed forces.
- b. With no clear guidelines for the methodology to be adopted for the selection and consequent retention of the 25% of the Agniveers for long term service, there is a danger of adhocism & experimentation that are detrimental to the ethos followed thus far in units and would lead to unhealthy competition. In the Army, a soldier is put through a formal assessment only when he is promoted to a Lance Naik after 5-6 years of service in the unit. In this scheme, the Agniveer will have to be assessed from the day he joins the unit thereby adding to the administrative work load of the officers & JCOs who are mostly below authorized strengths in the units.
- c. Air Marshal Anil Chopra was of the view that the scheme is transformative in nature which will lead to substantial savings and will produce disciplined and skilled manpower for the nation. However, common HR policies for the three services needs to be drawn up before any other aspect of "jointness" could be taken up. He felt that the Services were overstaffed and reduction in manpower is necessary. He also stated that the absorption of Agniveers into CAPFs and other Govt institutions must be legally mandated.

He concluded by stating that as of now the scheme should be viewed as a pilot project.

- d. Vice Admiral Anil Chopra was of the firm view that we must not mix up the aspects related to the security of the nation with employment generation. He emphasized that the resettlement of Agniveers is not the remit of the military and a whole of Govt approach was necessary for their resettlement. He favored the creation of two clear streams of personnel in the armed forces- the regulars who serve up to 30 years or more and the short service for both officers and men. The former would retire with a pension while the latter would be released after a stint from 5 to 10 years without pension and with no selection process for retention after their initial stint was completed. Also that the ratio of permanent to short service should be made flexible. He also stressed that the training time was too short for Agniveers to be handling complex equipment. He too favoured legislation for their lateral entry into the CAPFs.
- e. Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia made the assertion that the Agniveer scheme should first be run on a pilot basis, parallel to the existing system, before a final decision is taken. He feared that combat effectiveness and defence preparedness would be seriously impacted as this scheme would change the very nature of the DNA of the Indian Army. Also that in its current form it would not meet the aspirations of the youth leading

many rejected and dejected Agniveers making it back to their villages in dishonor. Future ready armed forces must have modern technology in the form of the latest platforms and equipment which must be seen as force multipliers and not force substitutes. As the military is an essential element of national power, he expressed the opinion that there was no need to experiment with it. He also questioned the need to have different policies for different organizations and stated that there were 27 organisations under MoD alone where long term employment is guaranteed. He also stressed that a whole of Govt approach is necessary for the scheme to be successful and that the ownership and accountability should lie with the Govt of India and not with the military. He also cautioned against rightsizing and too much incentivisation as it would create an unhealthy atmosphere. He concluded by saying that Agnipath should be treated as a pilot project.

## **Conclusion**

All the speakers and participants during the webinar welcomed the introduction of the new scheme of Agnipath but cautioned that rather than doing too much too soon the Govt must proceed with caution to ensure that combat efficiency is not sacrificed since India faces live threats to its security along nearly 8000 km of live borders while facing two adversaries 24x7 and that for one tangible ie cost, the military should not be compelled to sacrifice the many intangibles.

The YouTube recording of the webinar may be viewed at :-  
<https://youtu.be/rsWBG3HSJjc>