

# Agnipath scheme: Are four years enough for combat maturity?

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## The government should carefully look into the argument made for enhancing the term of engagement of Agniveers from four to eight or 10 years.

The Agnipath (AP) scheme to enrol personnel below officers rank in the Indian military has been implemented by the government. The maiden batch of Agniveers (AVs) shall soon be completing their first year in the units. Even in the face of the already implemented scheme, several experts have relentlessly advocated for tweaking the terms and services of the scheme towards reaping its optimal benefits to the armed forces. Proposals to introduce changes are mainly in terms of terms of service, training and benefits. The government too has expressed flexibility towards a mid-course correction after due deliberations.



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The Agnipath scheme, unveiled on June 14, 2022 lays out rules for the recruitment of soldiers in the armed forces (File Photo)(HT\_PRINT)

Recently at Drass, while addressing a gathering at the commemoration ceremony of 25 years of the Kargil War, Prime Minister Narendra Modi talked about the benefits of the scheme. He said the driving force behind introducing the AP scheme was to make the age

profile of the military younger as against the commonly held notion that the government had initiated the change to trim the pension bill. The scheme lays down the exit of 75 % of the recruited soldiers after four years of service with no pensionary benefits.

This article aims at deliberating on two major aspects of the AP scheme. Firstly, concerning the training duration of AVs at the regimental centres (RC) and, secondly, about making the military younger by mandating the exit of the bulk of the soldiers after four years, thereby creating vacancies for fresh inductees.

In the context of the training duration of six months for the AVs at the RC that a recruit undergoes before joining an army unit, critics have argued that the duration is too short to sufficiently mould a recruit into a combat-ready trained soldier. It is, however, felt that the critique related to the duration of training lacks substance: Even before the AP scheme was introduced, the training at an RC was not intensive and mainly focused on shaping a recruit on the basics of military culture and discipline.

Most specialised training as per the role and deployment of the unit is carried out in the units. The training of soldiers' draft in the units that arrive from the RC is being conducted and referred to as Young Soldiers (YS) training. These YS under the mentorship of unit leadership undergo a rigorous unit-level training of six to eight weeks duration, which forms the basis of character building and professionalism of a soldier. Most importantly, the YS undergoing training remains under the close watch of respective sub-unit commanders who, as per different abilities of the men, decide upon their future employment. The trainee YS imbibes the sense of regimentation and attachment to the unit while undergoing the training and develops faith in the motivational spirit of 'Naam, Namak and Nishan'. In essence, the scope and efficacy of training newly inducted soldiers in units are richer than the training at RCs and hence the so-called lacunae of short-duration RC raining are compensated adequately by unit-level training.

The second argument against the AP scheme in its present form is in connection with the terms of engagement of the AVs. The argument made is for enhancing the term of engagement from four to eight or ten years. These arguments make sense primarily due to two reasons.

Firstly, there are enough examples to establish that a sense of combat maturity in a soldier makes a difference on the battlefield. Combat maturity is at its best in a soldier with about six to eight years of service, after he undergoes specialised unit-level training to become a Lance Corporal — the lowest rank as a non-commissioned officer. In this rank, the soldier serves as second-in-command of a section and maturity is also ingrained by the virtue of handling troops under command. It is a rank held by specialists such as clerks, drivers, signallers, machine-gunners etc in the army with parallels in the Navy and Airforce.

Secondly, in a short period of four years, an AV is likely to be effective in the units merely for about three years, considering the periods of absence due to leave, recruit training at the RC etc. A wholesome assessment and optimum shaping up of an AV in such a short duration is ambitious, to say the least. The challenges of assessment and grooming of an AV in equipment/platform intensive branches and services like air defence artillery, signals, engineers, navy and airforce are further aggravated in a short duration of about three years.

This of course does not indicate that combat arms like infantry, artillery, armoured corps etc are not undergoing technology upgrades and require soldiers with reasonably high technical thresholds.

And not to forget the government's commitment to empower AVs to gear for a second career that shall further strain AV's availability to the unit. In view of the arguments above, the proposal to enhance the term of engagement to at least eight years warrants due consideration by the government.

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