Agnipath's Mid-course Correction

November 23, 2026



On November 4, 2026, the Union Cabinet approved a significant revision to the Agnipath recruitment scheme. The 25 percent of Agniveers selected on merit will continue to be inducted into the regular cadre after their initial four-year engagement. The remaining 75 percent will now be offered a second two-year engagement, subject to their willingness. At the end of six years, they will also be considered for regular enrolment, subject to selection criteria. The extended engagement will carry higher remuneration, an enhanced Seva Nidhi package and seniority benefits.

The decision came just over three weeks before roughly 18,300 first-batch Agniveers were due. The Navy's cohort was due out on November 21, the Air Force's on December 21, and the Army's on December 31. It affects the roughly 3,00,000 Agniveers already serving or undergoing training. The revision is therefore not a complete withdrawal of Agnipath, but a substantial alteration of its most contentious provision.

Both Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and Defense Secretary RK Singh called the extension a progressive step and a win-win solution. However, the CDS gave no direct answer when he was asked whether the four-plus-two model would govern future intakes. The opposition remained unpersuaded, calling the move a U-turn and questioning the intent to make it permanent.

Its significance

The amendment is significant because it exposes the tension between the military's need to retain trained personnel and the government's objective of building a younger, leaner and less expensive force. It also raises questions about whether Agnipath's original assumptions on manpower requirements, pension savings and the long-term sustainability of India's military recruitment model were realistic.

The original scheme sought to achieve three objectives: reduce the average age of the armed forces, moderate the growing pension burden and create a pool of young personnel who are likely to be tech-friendly. The Army's average age was expected to decline from around 32 to 26 years. But the first four years have exposed a difficult trade-off between these objectives and the military's need for experience and continuity alongside sustained discontent among veterans and aspiring recruits.

Veterans' response has been mixed, although most have welcomed the extension itself. Maj. Gen. Shammi Sabharwal, Lt. Gen. D.P. Pandey, and former Navy Chief Adm. Dinesh K. Tripathi have argued that retaining trained personnel makes operational sense. Former DGMO Lt. Gen. Vinod Bhatia described it as a modification that better reflects the services' requirements and soldiers' aspirations. On the other side, Maj. Gen. Yash Mor has called it a rollback of a poorly conceived policy, while former Navy Chief Adm. Arun Prakash has welcomed the change but maintained that Agnipath should eventually be scrapped. General Ashok K. Mehta has argued that the

extension offers political relief without resolving the military's underlying manpower problems.

The operational case for retaining experience

The operational case for keeping soldiers longer is perhaps the most sound rationale. Four years, including the initial training period, is a short time to develop a soldier who can operate independently, understand his unit's demands, and eventually assume responsibility for younger personnel. The problem is particularly relevant for the Army, where experience in counter-insurgency operations, high-altitude deployment along the LoC and the LAC, and the ability to lead small teams are developed over time. The Army also continues to face a substantial manpower shortage, worsened by the recruitment freeze during the Covid-19 pandemic. As Lt Gen H.S. Panag pointed out, roughly 60,000 regulars retire annually, whereas Agniveer intake has grown from 46,000 in 2022–23 to just 70,000 in 2026. At a 25 percent retention rate, replacing retiring soldiers would require 2.4 lakh annual recruits – making a widening deficit inevitable when three-quarters of every trained batch is sent home.

The extension, however, does not resolve the question of what kind of personnel the three services actually need. The Navy, for instance, reportedly sought to retain around 75 percent of Agniveers, while the Army and Air Force favored around 50 percent. The Navy's case rested on training pipelines of three years or more for submarines, naval aviation, and electronic and anti-submarine warfare. Arun Prakash adds that the Navy lost its Artificer cadre, which maintained its weapons, sensors and machinery, in 2022. As early as 2024, he argued that the scheme as designed suited only the Army, whose large infantry is not heavily burdened with technology.

The new arrangement also creates an awkward problem inside units. An Agniveer absorbed at four years reaches the regular cadre two years before a six-year batchmate, securing earlier

access to courses, appointments, and promotions. Although his seniority is protected against later batches, it is only one part of a military career. Sanjiv Krishan Sood, a former Additional Director General of the BSF, warns that ranking the 75 percent behind the 25 percent could breed resentment, unhealthy competition and sycophancy towards commanders.

The financial and strategic costs

The financial implications are equally important. Agnipath was partly justified by the need to contain pension expenditure and redirect resources towards modernization. The remedy rested on three-quarters of each intake leaving without a lifelong pension. However, if most Agniveers now end up in the regular cadre, much of that saving disappears. Serving four or six years as an Agniveer does not earn a pension on its own, as military rules require 15 years of permanent service. However, a soldier absorbed after six years can still serve until age 42 or 43, giving them enough time to complete those 15 years and retire with a full pension. What remains unclear is whether the extra two-year extension will count toward that 15-year requirement, as the government has not yet spelled out the fine print. This further negates the age problem it set out to correct. If most recruits serve six years before joining the regular cadre, the force's age profile could become older rather than younger.

The consequences also extend beyond India's borders. Recruitment of Nepali Gorkhas into the Indian Army has remained suspended since Nepal objected to the Agnipath terms in 2022. The six-year option could make the revised scheme more acceptable to Kathmandu, but it does not by itself restore the assurance of a regular military career or pension. The Indian Army's seven Gorkha Rifles regiments traditionally relied on a 70:30 ratio of Nepal-domiciled to Indian-domiciled Gorkhas. A multi-year freeze in Nepali intake has forced the Indian Army to rely heavily on Indian-domiciled Gorkhas. Prime Minister Balendra Shah's November 22–23 visit provides an

opportunity to discuss the issue. However, reports suggest that New Delhi has put the onus of a resolution on Kathmandu.

The future course of action

The government has effectively bought itself two years to assess the performance of the extended cohort and the requirements of the three services. The immediate indication will come from how many of the existing Agniveers opt for the additional two years, particularly in the Navy and Air Force, where the loss of trained technical personnel has been a major concern. A gradual differentiation of service conditions is also likely. Replacing a trained submarine technician or aircraft specialist is not as easy as replacing an infantry soldier. The revised framework has temporarily addressed this through a common extension, but the underlying differences between the services remain.

The mid-course shift has also unsettled troops who had already planned their exits. In Maharashtra, several Agniveers submitted their unwillingness to continue, relying on the state’s promise of direct, exam-free recruitment into the police force. They fear that turning down the two-year extension could jeopardize their promised state quota.

Agnipath was pushed through in 2022 despite the services’ reservations. It has survived by becoming, step by step, something closer to the system it replaced. India will probably end up with a force that is somewhat younger at entry and cheaper for its first six years, but nearly as costly after that.