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Indian Armed Forces Seek Higher Agniveer Retention to Strengthen Operational Readiness and Military Modernisation

Published On: 14-07-2026

Recent Developments:

- The **Indian Armed Forces** have proposed increasing the **retention percentage of Agniveers** beyond the existing **25% ceiling** under the **Agnipath Scheme**.
- As the first batch of **Agniveers recruited in early 2023** approaches the completion of its four-year tenure, the **Department of Military Affairs (DMA)** has received proposals from all three Services highlighting the need to retain experienced personnel.
- The proposal aims to preserve trained manpower, maximise returns on investments made in advanced military training and ensure continuity in operational capability.

Need for Higher Agniveer Retention:

Proposed Retention Requirements of the Three Services:

- At present, only **25% of Agniveers** from each batch are eligible for permanent enrolment in the Armed Forces.
- The proposed changes include:
- The **Indian Navy** may seek retention of nearly **75%** of its Agniveers because naval operations require highly specialised technical expertise.
- The **Indian Army** and the **Indian Air Force** may seek retention of around **50%** of their Agniveers.

Preventing Manpower Shortages:

- A fixed **25% retention ceiling**, combined with the annual retirement of regular personnel, could create temporary shortages in trained military manpower.
- A higher retention rate would help maintain force strength and ensure a smoother transition during the initial implementation years of the Agnipath Scheme.

Lessons from Operation Sindoor:

- Operational feedback from **Operation Sindoor** indicated that Agniveers performed effectively in active operational environments, while reaffirming that experienced soldiers remain indispensable.
- The following factors enable experienced personnel to respond more effectively during complex military situations:
- **Multiple operational deployments, extensive field experience and institutional knowledge.**

Technological Transformation and Military Modernisation:

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- The induction of modern military capabilities has introduced:
- **Advanced weapon systems, high-end equipment and sophisticated technological platforms.**
- Operating these systems requires prolonged specialised training and practical experience.
- Releasing trained personnel after only four years could reduce operational efficiency and diminish the long-term value of training investments.

Technical Requirements of the Navy and Air Force:

- Longer service tenures are particularly important for the **Navy and Air Force** because: **Warships, submarines, combat aircraft and advanced aviation systems** require deep technical proficiency that develops over extended periods.

Agnipath Scheme:

About the Scheme:

- The **Agnipath Scheme** was launched in **June 2022**.
- It is a **nationwide merit-based military recruitment programme** for enrolling personnel below officer rank into the **Army, Navy and Air Force**.
- Recruits under the scheme are known as **Agniveers**.

Objectives of the Agnipath Scheme:

Building a Younger Military Force:

- The scheme aims to reduce the average age of the Armed Forces from approximately **32 years to 26 years**, thereby improving agility and combat effectiveness.

Fiscal Sustainability:

- The scheme seeks to reduce pension liabilities and redirect financial resources towards **defence modernisation** and **indigenous defence production**.

Addressing Emerging Security Challenges:

- The scheme is designed to strengthen military preparedness against:
- **Hybrid warfare, cyber threats, terrorism, space warfare and electronic warfare.**

Nation Building:

- The scheme seeks to develop a disciplined, skilled and employment-ready youth population.
- Trained Agniveers can contribute to **employment generation, disaster management** and the vision of **Viksit Bharat @2047**.

Key Features of the Agnipath Scheme:

Tenure and Age Limit:

- The service tenure of an Agniveer is **4 years**.
- The prescribed age limit is:
- **17.5 to 21 years.**
- The upper age limit was temporarily relaxed to **23 years** for the first recruitment cycle.

Financial Benefits:

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- Agniveers receive a customised monthly financial package during their service.
- Upon completion of four years:
- Around **75% of Agniveers** are discharged from service.
- They receive a tax-free **Seva Nidhi Package** of approximately **₹11.71 lakh**.
- The **Seva Nidhi Package** consists of the Agniveer's contribution along with an equal matching contribution from the Government.

Other Benefits:

- Agniveers are provided with:
- **Skill certificates, priority in recruitment to the Central Armed Police Forces and State Police, and a non-contributory life insurance cover of ₹48 lakh.**
- In case of service-related contingencies:
- They are eligible for **₹44 lakh as disability compensation** and **up to ₹1 crore compensation in case of death during service.**

Permanent Enrolment:

- At present, a maximum of **25% of each batch** is selected for permanent enrolment based on organisational requirements and performance.
- Agniveers selected for permanent service are required to serve for a minimum additional period of **15 years** under the service conditions applicable to regular personnel.

Need for Reforms in the Agnipath Scheme:

Integration with Atmanirbhar Bharat and Defence Corridors:

- The Agnipath exit framework should be aligned with the **Defence Industrial Corridors** in **Uttar Pradesh** and **Tamil Nadu**.
- Agniveers trained on advanced defence technologies should be provided opportunities in:
- **Private defence manufacturing, research and development organisations, start-ups and aviation maintenance sectors.**
- Such integration would strengthen India's indigenous defence manufacturing ecosystem.

Preserving Regimental Ethos and Military Cohesion:

- The effectiveness of the Indian Armed Forces depends not only on technology but also on:
- **Regimental traditions, unit cohesion and institutional identity.**
- Service conditions should preserve military culture while ensuring operational effectiveness.
- The initial four-year tenure may be viewed as a rigorous assessment and training phase rather than merely a short-term contractual engagement.

Evidence-Based Policy Review:

- The scheme should be comprehensively reviewed after completion of the first recruitment cycle by considering:
- **Operational feedback, manpower requirements, institutional assessments and force preparedness.**
- The **Army, Navy and Air Force** should be permitted to determine retention levels according to their distinct operational and technical requirements.
- Greater priority should be accorded to Agniveers trained in critical technologies and specialised operational roles.

Institutional Oversight and Course Correction:

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- A defence reform of this scale requires periodic legislative oversight.
- A **biennial review** by the **Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence** can ensure transparent evaluation.
- Such reviews should assess: **Combat readiness, defence expenditure, human resource trends and overall policy outcomes.**

Conclusion:

- The Agnipath Scheme should evolve beyond a purely fiscal reform and adopt a **strategic human capital approach.**
- Flexible retention policies, stronger welfare measures and sustained technical training can help India maintain a young and agile military while preserving the experienced manpower required for technology-driven warfare.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Important Facts:

- **Launch of Agnipath Scheme:** June 2022.
- **Service Tenure:** 4 years.
- **Maximum Permanent Retention:** 25%.
- **Age Limit:** 17.5–21 years.
- **Seva Nidhi Package:** Approximately ₹11.71 lakh.

Life Insurance Cover: ₹48 lakh