



Understanding the Agnipath protests

Economic vulnerability, especially unemployment and the social value of government jobs, lies at the heart of the ongoing stir against the scheme. Protesters are driven by the desire for social prestige and the chance of upward mobility

The angry protests engulfing north India after the announcement of the Agnipath scheme are a severe indictment of the socio-political moment India finds itself in. To understand why thousands of unemployed young men have resorted to violence, we need to look beyond the specificities of the flawed scheme towards our politics, economy and society, and ask why secure government jobs and their fiscally burdensome pensions matter so much to the aspirations of young India.

Economic vulnerability, specifically unemployment and the social value of government jobs lie at the heart of the protests. In recent days, the government has actively repackaged Agnipath to the public as an employment generation and skill development scheme that will enable

Agniveers — as the new recruits will be called — to access jobs in the private sector (and government paramilitary, defence and ministry positions) once they are decommissioned. But the angry protesters are not buying this. They understand that the true objective of Agnipath is not job creation, but reducing the government's bloated defence pension and wage bill (currently 50% of the defence budget). More importantly, they are acutely aware of the economic vulnerabilities they will confront four years down the line with no guaranteed employment, no pension and no social standing.

An angry protester articulated these fears at a television debate I participated in. My fellow panelists dismissed him as an "entitled" young man keen on cushy government jobs with a guaranteed pension. Indeed, this perception that government jobs are sought after for their comfortable terms and lifelong security is widely entrenched in our policy imagination. These comforts, it is argued, have incentivised inefficiency and corruption while placing an unsustainable and wasteful fiscal burden on the exchequer (full disclosure, I too have made this argument in the context of government teachers). Consequently, government jobs, especially at the frontlines (teachers, health workers etc), are increasingly shifting toward contractual posts with limited success when it comes to resolving the efficiency problem.

But this characterisation of government jobs fails to acknowledge the

socio-economic context in which these jobs are the holy grail. In contemporary India, the State (not market) remains the primary mediator of social opportunity. The harsh truth is that despite liberalisation, our economy failed to create credible pathways for long-term secure employment for the bulk of India, even in the high-growth years. When the young are faced with informal, insecure jobs in the private sector, it is hardly surprising that government jobs are a loud political demand.

Moreover, access to State power through government jobs is a chance for mobility, an escape from the clutches of social oppression because these jobs confer individuals a new professional identity of a "government official", which is empowering. It is in pursuit of this identity (and not the cushy terms) that many young Indians leave lucrative private sector jobs for the government, often taking a pay cut. It is this desire for professional identity and prestige that is driving the current protests. In the specific context of Agnipath, as Centre for Policy Research's Sushant Singh has argued, being in the military confers status, prestige and position to individuals. It is what motivates military officers. Agnipath has stripped our young of this opportunity for status and mobility while offering no real alternatives. These are not the demands of an entitled young population. These are demands of desperation in an economy with limited opportunity.



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None of this is to argue that the government should be the primary employer. It cannot. It should not. In fact, it is the over-reliance on the government as the employer that has contributed to the pathologies of the State, including the high fiscal burden that wages and liabilities place. However, the path to reform doesn't lie in piecemeal contractualisation of the State. It has to be rooted in the real challenges of the Indian economy, the aspirations of mobility and the social value of government jobs.

Finally, on the violence of these protests. Make no mistake. The violence we are witnessing isn't just the product of disgruntled and unemployed youth. It is a product of our current politics — a politics of hate and bigotry that routinely encourages violence in its pursuit of ideological dominance. Images of violence during religious processions, scenes of lynching, of mobs destroying public property, of trolls using uncivil and violent language to demonise fellow citizens, are now routine in the daily news cycle. Only days before the protests,

the State, with complete disregard for the rule of law and due process, bulldozed the homes of ordinary citizens because they were accused of a crime. Violence has been legitimised in our everyday political life and the young men are mere pawns in this political game. It should be no surprise, then, that they resorted to violence, in their own political protest. I make this argument not to condone violence but as a reminder of the dangers of mainstreaming violence in the pursuit of political power. When politics and violence come together, it consumes every aspect of our democratic lives.

There are no easy answers to the conundrums we face in our politics, economy and society that are driving these violent protests. But if we do not acknowledge the problem, we risk being consumed by the flames lit by our young whose aspirations we failed to understand.