

# Opinion: 'Agnipath' Adds To Modi's List Of Inglorious Blunders

*Jawhar Sircar*

As fire and protests rage across the country, one is reminded of the utter lawlessness that Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, the three classical political philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries had referred to as the 'state of nature'. Things are not yet so bad, thankfully so, in spite of scenes of thousands of the unemployed young torching millions' worth of public property. They are up against the new *Agnipath* scheme that seeks to recruit some 45,000 short-time 'soldiers' into the army on a contractual basis. Modi's India has not seen such a worrisome breakdown of law and order, one that is so expressly violent and widespread in so many states.

The farmers' agitation was uncompromising, intense and prolonged, but it was confined to a small area and did not lead to a conflagration on this scale. Protests over the amendment to the new citizenship law erupted in many cities but were certainly not so violent. This is quite different from what Narendra Modi is used to.

So what has gone wrong this time? Well, regimes that carry on endlessly without delivering the desired and promised results do provoke anti-incumbency outbursts of public fury. But this *Agnipath* agitation is much too segmented among a thinnish age-strata of the youth to really qualify as a mass upsurge. True, students and the youth have led innumerable movements against governments and toppled a remarkable number. But only time will tell how broad is the support base and what is the real temperature prevailing among those who pelt stones, fight the police and burn public property. For the present, it may be worthwhile to speculate on what this episode tells us.

The first is unemployment - very serious joblessness. From 2017, which is after Modi inflicted his devastating demonetisation on unsuspecting Indians, India's labour force participation rate started falling from a poor 46%. In five years, it has sunk to 40%, which is considerably less than the 75% to 80% of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and Nepal's 77%. Rates higher than India's help a Xi Jinping sustain his stranglehold in China. Even neighbouring Bangladesh, once a 'basket case', has 57% of its appropriate working population engaged against India's 40%. Yet, no one in India dare tell the leader to stop messing with the economy that has benefited only the ultra-rich. After all, Forbes reports that Ambani's net wealth has shot up from \$18.6 billion in 2014 to \$104.2 billion under Modi's rule, while Adani has galloped at an incredible rate from just \$7.1 billion to \$101 billion in the same period.

On the other hand, statistics of International Labour Organization dated February

this year reveal that one of every four of India's youth in the age bracket of 15 to 24 do not find any work, even for a pittance. It is a large section of this group that appears to be in the violent protests against the *Agnipath* scheme. Among India's poorer neighbours and nations in Southeast Asia, the corresponding numbers of 'no work' in this strata is between 7 and 14 percent.

The immediate reason for the outburst over temporary recruitment to the armed forces may be the withdrawal of free food rations to a whooping 850 million Indians during Covid. In a reply to my letter, the Food Minister confirmed March 4 this year that nearly 80 million tons of grains had been allocated for the 'free food' schemes of the PM in the last two financial years. This is the largest-ever dole and it brought down our 'excess' food stocks to today's precarious level - wheat exports had to be stopped recently. But now that there is no free food available, and even the 100 days' work scheme (MNREGA) is slashed so terribly, the Hindi heartland that voted so wholeheartedly for Modi is on the boil. This is, indeed, the first real threat to the regime and the *Agnipath* decision appears more impetuous than earlier blunders.

The Army is too disciplined to complain, though former generals are voicing deep concerns, perhaps on behalf of those who are not supposed to speak. In addition to issues regarding its operational unworkability, *faujies* strongly feel that a 'no rank, no regiment', casual come-and-go category will surely affect the deep-rooted sentiments and traditions that keep the forces ticking. Politicians, civilians and *babus* hardly understand these. Many fear that a group of arms-trained youth could well turn to crime and violence once they are disbanded. as they face harsh unemployment and a fall in sustenance and living standards.

There are reasons to speculate that Savarkar's exhortation to the Hindu right youth at Hindu Mahasabha's Calcutta session in November 1939 to "secure entry into military forces for youths in any and every way" may finally be coming true. He repeated it at the Madurai session in December 1940 to enlist in "various branches of British armed forces en masse." Savarkar's idea was to build up an 'army of trained defenders of Hinduism'.

Modi's major blunders happen as no leader can gauge the mood of the people by confiding only in hand-picked sycophants. The earthy wisdom that other politicians in his party or outside have acquired from four to five decades of grassroots contact is denied - Modi has no need for others, having cut everyone to size. Bureaucrats carry a lifetime of experience, but those around him refrain from sharing this. Modi has delivered many blunders of catastrophe-level - and *Agnipath* may join this inglorious list.

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