

Statement (India): On Agnipath Scheme and its Fallout - Anger in India over Modi's new army recruitment plan

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India like all hegemonistic powers spends unnecessarily and unjustifiably huge amounts of money on its armed forces because it wants to “power project” and not merely to territorially protect itself. “Power Projection” and having a “Sphere of Influence” or being “Naturally Pre-eminent in the Region” are all euphemisms for wanting to dominate, and when desired, bully weaker countries in the neighbourhood and beyond. India has the second largest armed forces in the world; its annual defence budget is the world's third largest; and it ranks fourth largest as an importer of arms. It is also desperate to build up a huge public-private military-industrial complex. In addition, the Indian army has been used massively for suppression of internal dissent.

India also has the largest number of under-nourished and mal-nourished people as compared to any other country in the world. Official statistics that are publicised seriously underestimate the proportion of people below the poverty line as well as the size of the those “vulnerable” and at constant risk of falling below or near that poverty line which in any case does not cover minimum levels of “basic needs” such as health, education, housing, social security, etc. In short, its public welfare systems are a longstanding and enduring disgrace! This BJP central government, like previous ones, is not in the least interested in shifting financial resources from the defence sector to address these areas. Rather, under the BJP dispensation, privatization of healthcare, of education, contractisation of jobs, the growth of joblessness have skyrocketed. And this has happened hand in hand with the growth in wealth of the top (approximately) 325000 households to above Rs 10 crores. Thus, it is the current regime that has done most to augment disparities beyond its predecessors.

It is within this overall political-strategical framework of pursuing regional hegemonistic ambitions, strengthening nuclear and non-nuclear military capacities, and communalising the whole coercive apparatus of the armed forces, the paramilitaries and the police, along with a steeply right-wing economic policy, that we must understand its latest measures, namely widening the pool from which the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) is to be selected as well as Agnipath.

Widening the pool for CDS selection means destroying the principle of prioritising seniority and

making sure that the CDS chosen is solidly pro-Hindutva as well as becoming even more subordinate to Modi's PMO. The Agnipath policy has two key purposes. First, by creating greater competition for a more restricted number of full-time recruits, make it clear that those willing to support Hindutva ideology and practice will be favoured. Those with the four-year 'tour duty' experience (through which they would have learned to use sophisticated arms) can then become part of other paramilitary forces or form private militias for control by Hindutva forces operating through and outside state and central governments. Secondly, yes, there is an economic purpose---to shift expense burdens from paying pensions but NOT to promote public welfare or to create more decent and secure jobs. It is to release more resources for technologically strengthening and streamlining the military war-fighting capabilities. Around 60% of India's defence budget currently is spent on salaries and pensions whereas in China it is only one-third.

Why has there been a public outcry and protest actions in various places by youth including those who in some way lean towards Hindutva? The reason is obvious---in a country where unemployment is rising to unprecedented levels and where insecure forms of employment at miserable wages are rampant and routine, one sure avenue of decent existence, albeit very small, indeed tiny in the overall scheme of things---some 60,000 recruits annually---is now being cut by three-fourths and more. A look at the recruitment patterns of JCOs and other ranks in the army show a preponderance of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Bihar, Rajasthan - some of the core areas of Hindutva militant cadre recruitment, as well as scenes of recent violence. Caste and community data is not openly given as the army professes to be above caste and community, but sufficient data exists to show preferences. For example, the President's Guard, considered an elite regiment, is dominated by Rajputs, Hindu Jats and Sikh Jats. A CNN-IBN report of 2014 suggested that out of India's huge army, only about 29,000 were Muslims, though at the officer level India has had eight Muslim Major Generals till the same period. Clearly, the trends do suggest that the same population that has been voting heavily for the ideological stance of the RSS, ignoring other socio-economic issues like rising prices, destruction of health care, or complete dismantling of the public sector, is also the biggest force going into the army.

The Agnipath scheme is a cynical move. When huge masses see joining the army as a principal road to economic security, the propaganda about soldiers being in the army for patriotic reasons is blown up.

Instead of welcoming the move, as the rulers had thought, large masses of their supporters have temporarily deserted them and have taken to the streets. Trained in violence over the previous years, aware that the state will be far softer on violence committed by Hindu upper and intermediate caste young men, they have been blocking roads, attacking government buildings, occasionally attacking MLAs and ministers, and setting fire to all manner of things, including trains.

The response of considerable sections of the left, while not totally unanticipated, has still been deeply disappointing. It is astonishing that the Indian Left of CPI/CPM/CPI-ML Liberation while attacking this policy are doing so for all the wrong reasons that do not challenge but feed into the overall project of this Hindutva government; that ignore the need to oppose anti-poor neoliberal priorities as well as opposing the hegemonist ambitions of the ruling class and its ideological drumbeaters

Our stand on these are based on the following principled positions:

1. We stand for reduction of military spending for power display
2. We oppose the glamourization of the armed forces in the name of national security and justifying military spending under that banner.

3. We condemn and oppose the extensive use of the armed forces for suppression of domestic dissent by the reactionary Indian state.

4. We believe that the best way to achieve security with neighbouring countries is through diplomacy, and settlement of all disputes through peaceful negotiations and mutual give and take.

5. We oppose India's massive military hardware imports, and also the build up of nuclear weapons for military power play.

Accordingly, in the current situation

NO TO AGNIPATH

NO TO COMMUNALISATION OF ARMED FORCES AND SOCIETY

NO TO HEGEMONIST AMBITIONS AND BEHAVIOUR

YES TO MASSIVE DIVERSION OF FUNDS TOWARDS PUBLIC WELFARE AND JOB CREATION

NO TO ANY SUPPORT FOR EXPANSION OF FULL TIME PROFESSIONAL ARMY IN THE NAME OF MORE JOBS FOR THE NEEDY

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P.S.

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• Corrections introduced 22 June 2022, including this sentence: "Around 60% of India's defence budget currently is spent on salaries and pensions whereas in China it is only one-third." [Previously, only the word pensions was keyed, omitting the "salaries and"...].