

NAVIGATING REFORMS IN THE INDIAN ARMY: IMPLICATIONS OF THE AGNIPATH SCHEME ON THE GORKHAS

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INTRODUCTION

The Gorkhas have had a special place in India since the 19th century. They served in various wars in which they displayed their fighting skills. First, they fought as a militia, and after that, they served in the British Indian Army till India's independence. After the partition, most of the Gorkhas joined the Indian Army and fought all the wars for the country. But in recent times, there has been a big hurdle for the Gorkhas. Due to the Agnipath scheme of India, no recruitment has been done in the last four years.

Historically, the terms, 'Gorkhas' and 'Gurkhas' were synonyms of Nepalis. They mainly originated from the hill areas dominated by the Gorkhas. The King of Nepal, Prithvi Narayan Shah, expanded his

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territory up to these hill areas. Mainly, the Gorkhas are native to the Indian subcontinent, and reside in Nepal and in some parts of India. The name 'Gorkha' can be traced to the medieval Hindu warrior saint Guru Gorakhnath. There is a famous temple of Guru Gorakhnath in Gorakhpur. The Gorkhas are mainly recruited from the Gorkha Recruiting Depot (GRD), Kunaraghat, Gorakhpur, to serve in the Nepal Army, Indian Army, and British Army.

The Gorkhas comprise different ethnic groups, clans, and tribes. They also include the Khas who are a high-class Hindu group. The others are the Gurungs, Magars, Limbus, Tamangs and Rais. Most of the Gorkhas follow either the Hindu or Buddhist religion. The Gorkhas were first recruited by Maharaja Ranjit Singh after the Nepal-Sikh War of 1809, as he was impressed by their fighting potential. Though the Gorkhas were defeated in the war, they were retained in the Sikh Army as mercenaries.

GORKHAS IN THE BRITISH INDIAN ARMY

The first confrontation between the Gorkhas and the British occurred during the first Anglo-Nepal War (1814-16). This war was fought due to a border dispute with Nepal over the British expansionist policy. In this war, the British were impressed by the martial abilities of the Gorkhas. Major-General David Ochterlony and William Fraser recognised the potential of the Gorkhas. During the war, Major-General Ochterlony recruited the defectors of the Gorkha Army as an irregular force. After the end of the war, the Treaty of Sugauli was signed between the British East India Company and the Gorkha kingdom in 1816.¹ According to this treaty, a large number of Gorkhas were permitted to serve in the East India Company's army.² The British renamed the Gorkhas as Gurkhas.

After this treaty, the Gurkhas helped in the expansion of the British East India Company in the Indian subcontinent. They fought in the first Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46), second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-49), first Afghan War (1839) and second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80). The Gorkhas were also deployed to suppress the Indian

1. R. Rae, *Kathmandu Dilemma: Resetting Indo-Nepal Ties* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2021), p. 164.

2. "Brigade of Gurkhas," British Army, <https://www.army.mod.uk/who-we-are/corps-regiments-and-units/brigade-of-gurkhas/>. Accessed on October 10, 2024.

mutiny of 1857. This was the litmus test of the loyalty of the Gorkhas. After 1857, the recruitment of the Gorkhas increased significantly. Till the beginning of World War I, there were 10 Gorkha Regiments in the British Indian Army.³ Between 1857 and 1947, the Gorkhas served actively in Burma, Afghanistan, the northwest frontier of India, Cyprus, Malaya, China, and Tibet to preserve the British interests.

The Gorkhas were also patronised during World Wars I and II. About two lakh⁴ Gorkha soldiers participated in World War I and about 1.1 lakh⁵ in World War II. They also suffered thousands of casualties. By serving in the various wars, the Gorkhas stood as a strong pillar for the British expansionist policy. Whenever the British Empire was in trouble, the Gorkhas were the first to be selected to deal with the crisis. After the tripartite agreement in 1947, four regiments of the Gorkhas actively served in the British Army. They are regarded as the most fearless and finest soldiers. Currently, there are 4,000 soldiers serving in the British Army.⁶

GORKHAS IN THE INDIAN ARMY

During the partition procedure, the defence equipment, industries, weapons, etc., were divided between India and Pakistan. Soldiers were given the choice to opt for either country. Although the division of assets was done on a rational basis, the issue of Gorkha soldiers remained unresolved. In 1949, India removed all royal titles related to the British legacy, and 'Gurkhas' was changed to 'Gorkhas'.

A tripartite agreement which is known as the 'Memorandum of Agreement on Recruitment of Gurkha Troops' was signed on May 1, 1947, among India, Nepal, and Britain. This was ratified on November 9, 1947.⁷ India allowed the Gorkhas to continue to serve in

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3. B. Mollo, *The Indian Army* (London: Blandford Press, 1981), p. 155.
 4. John Parker, *The Gurkhas: The Inside Story of the World's Most Feared Soldiers* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2005).
 5. "The Gurkhas," National Army Museum, Chelsea, London, <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/gurkhas>. Accessed on October 12, 2024.
 6. British Army, n. 2.
 7. M. Singh, "Tribals Likely to Fill the Void in Indian Army's Gorkha Regiment," *The New Indian Express*, July 23, 2023, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2023/Jul/23/tribals-likely-to-fill-the-void-in-indian-armys-gorkha-regiment-2597549.html>. Accessed on October 13, 2024.

the Indian Army. The main objective of this agreement was to protect the rights of the Gorkhas serving in the British and Indian Armies. According to this agreement, six Gorkha regiments were included in the Indian Army, while four Gorkha regiments were transferred to the British Army,⁸ and the decision to let the soldiers opt for the British or Indian Army was abandoned. Many soldiers decided not to go with the British Army. So, the Indian Army decided to form the 11th Gorkha Rifles for these soldiers. The main reason behind this was the uncertainty of their future in the British Army. However, they had experience of wars in Europe. Four British Gorkha regiments were posted in the British colonies. They actively participated in the Malayan insurgency. They replaced the Sikh units in Singapore, which came back to India after its independence, and are still part of Malaysia's and Brunei's armed forces. This agreement doesn't apply to the Gorkhas serving in the Nepal Army. An agreement was also signed whereby the Gorkha soldiers would be paid the same wages and, subsequently, receive pensions in both the British and Indian Armies. This agreement consists of 7 Clauses, which emphasise the protection of Nepali citizens while in service.⁹

After some time, the 7th Gorkha Regiment was formed by the merging of the 7th and 10th Gorkha Rifles, because they did not accept the transfer to the British Army. The first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru advocated the principle of *Panchsheel* to promote good relations with neighbouring states. To consolidate relations with Nepal, Nehru focussed on the recruitment of Gorkhas in the Indian Army. The Gorkhas have been continually deployed along India's borders with Pakistan and China. This deployment of the Gorkhas makes them a significant part of India's military strategy and planning. They have fought all the wars for India since independence. Within the Indian Army, they have also served in UN peace-keeping missions in Lebanon, Sudan, Bangladesh,

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8. G. Pathak, "Gurkhas' Quest for Justice: Possible Remedies for Gurkhas Under International Human Rights System," *Kathmandu School of Law Review*, 2019, p. 15.
 9. A. Ethirajan, "Agnipath Scheme: The Pain of Nepal's Gorkhas Over Indian Army's New Hiring Plan," *BBC*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-66603133>. Accessed on October 13, 2024.

Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, etc. Currently, 39 Gorkha battalions in seven regiments are serving for India.¹⁰

The Gorkhas are well known for their bravery, steadfast loyalty, professionalism, discipline, valour, and martial skills. They showed their fighting potential in all the wars they fought in. The Gorkhas were honoured with various awards from time to time. Captain Ralph Turner of the 3rd Queen Alexandra's own Gurkha Rifles said about the Gorkhas, "Bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had the country more faithful friends than you".¹¹ India's first Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw joined the 8th Gorkha Regiment as a colonel after India's independence. Manekshaw praised the valour of the Gorkhas, "If a man said he was not afraid of dying, he was either a liar or a Gorkha".¹² The battle cry and motto of the Gorkhas clearly describes their character: "It is better to die than to live like a coward".

AGNIPATH SCHEME

This scheme was launched by the Indian government in June 2022 and was implemented in September 2022. Agnipath means 'Path of Fire.' This scheme was proposed to recruit soldiers, airmen, and sailors in the three Services of the Indian armed forces: the army, air force, and navy, respectively. After the selection, these new soldiers would be called the 'Agniveers'. The Agniveers have a limited tour of duty for only four years in service. After four years of duty, only 25 per cent of the soldiers will get permanent jobs for 15 years in their registered batch.¹³ This process will be done on a performance basis. There is no provision for recruitment of officers in this scheme. The officers rank recruitment will continue as before. After implementing this scheme, all other recruitment methods will become null and void. Agnipath will be the only scheme of recruitment in the Indian armed forces.

10. Lieutenant General S. Chauhan, "The Gorkha Rifles of the Indian Army: 200 Years of Gallantry," *Financial Express*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-the-gorkha-rifles-of-the-indian-army-200-years-of-gallantry-2411630/lite/>. Accessed on October 13, 2024.

11. National Army Museum, n. 5.

12. "The Gorkha Welfare Trust," <https://www.gwt.org.uk/about-the-gurkhas/gurkhas/>. Accessed on October 16, 2024.

13. D. S. Hooda, "The Agnipath Scheme: Analysis and a Way Forward," *DPG Policy Brief*, vol. vii, issue 28, 2022.

Candidates, above 17.5 and below 21 years can apply for recruitment under this scheme. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian government decided to relax the age limit and now the upper age limit is 23 years.¹⁴ This upper age limit has been made applicable for a short time, because, during COVID-19, the recruitment process was badly affected.

Historically, the Kargil Review Committee, headed by K. Subrahmanyam, had recommended short service for soldiers. The committee recommended reduction in the average age of soldiers. Currently, the average age of the Indian armed forces personnel is 32 to 33 years.¹⁵ The Review Committee, in its report, focussed on a young and fit army. Mukund Narvane, the former chief of the Indian military, in his book *Four Stars of Destiny* has written that the Agniveer scheme was originally prepared by the late General and Chief of Defence Staff Vipin Rawat. It was designed as a pilot project comprising only 5,000 soldiers.¹⁶ These transformative reforms came as a surprise to all the three armed forces.

The Agniveers, in their four years of duty, apart from salary, will also get a hardship allowance, travel allowance, uniform allowance, facility of canteens and health care. They will also get 30 days leave in a year as well as medical leave. There is no provision for pension for the Agniveers. After completion of the four years of service, a Seva Nidhi Package of Rs 11.71 lakh will be paid to the Agniveers, including interest on it.¹⁷ They will get life insurance cover of Rs 48 lakh for four years. The government will provide rehabilitation and resettlement facilities and bridge courses. Only 25 per cent of the Agniveers will be regularised and different badges will be posted on their uniform. Around 30,000 to 40,000 recruitments will be done per year for Personnel Below Officer Rank (PBOR). The Agniveers will be

14. L. K. Behera, "The Case for Agnipath," Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, 2023.

15. "Explained with Numbers: Why the Military Needs Agnipath and Agniveers," *Swarajya*, <https://swarajyamag.com/defence/explained-with-numbers-why-the-military-needs-agnipath-and-agniveers>. Accessed on October 17, 2024.

16. A. K. Mehta, "Unhappy New Year for Gorkha Brigade: Downsizing and Ultimate Phasing Out Became a Reality," *The Wire*, January 3, 2023, <https://m.thewire.in/article/security/unhappy-new-year-for-the-gorkha-brigade-downsizing-and-ultimate-phasing-out-becoming-a-reality/amp>. Accessed on October 18, 2024.

17. "Agnipath Yojana," Ministry of Defence. Accessed on October 18, 2024.

trained for six months and posted for 3.5 years on a tour of duty, after which, the government will also provide alternative employment to them in the public and private sectors, based on their qualification and aptitude.

They will also get a reservation of 10 percent for recruitment in the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) and Assam Rifles after four years of service as Agniveers. This provision will fulfil the recommendation of the Kargil Review Committee for an integrated manpower policy for the armed forces, CAPFs, and paramilitary forces. The main objective of the Agnipath scheme is to encourage patriotism in the youths and give them a chance to serve in the armed forces. India has followed the example of countries with compulsory military service, but in India, there is no compulsion to join. The main focus of the government is to train the youth and make them economically independent. However, due to the Agnipath scheme, the government faced protests all over India. Thousands of youngsters prepare hard to get recruited into the armed forces. But in this scheme, they will not get full-time jobs and pensions. They will be unemployed after four years of service and only 25 per cent of the Agniveers will be reinducted in a full-time job. Also, they cannot leave their job mid-way as Agniveers.

After the launching of the Agnipath scheme, the Indian government had to face criticism not only in India but also in the Gorkha-dominated regions in Nepal. Before this scheme, 1,200 to 1,500 Gorkhas were recruited every year in the Indian Army and trained in the Gorkha Training Centre located in Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh), Sabathu (Himachal Pradesh), Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh) and Shillong (Meghalaya).¹⁸ This scheme has impacted not only Indian youngsters but also the Nepali Gorkhas, leading to negativity in the two countries' relations. The border dispute on Lipulekh, Kalapani, and Limpyundhara had already affected the relations between the two countries, and this scheme has further created a stalemate, with

18. R. Sharma, "Indian Army's Gorkha Regiment: A Unique, Shared History of Bravery Faces New Challenges," *Hindustan Times*, September 4, 2023. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/indian-army-s-gorkha-regiment-a-unique-shared-history-of-bravery-faces-new-challenges-101693831277220.html>. Accessed on October 18, 2024.

the result that relations between the neighbouring countries are at an all-time low.

NEPAL'S CONCERNS OVER THE AGNIPATH SCHEME

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the recruitment process in the Indian Army was stopped. In 2020 and 2021, the Gorkhas too were not recruited because of the same reason. In June 2022, the Indian government introduced a new scheme for recruitment in the three Services. Nepal has many concerns due to this scheme; It is upset about the future of the Gorkhas, and says that the Agnipath scheme violates the Tripartite Agreement of 1947. Nepal has accused India of not consulting it on the issue of Agniveers. According to Nepal, there is a lack of transparency and political consensus on this issue. Due to this scheme, the 75-year-long tradition of Gorkhas' recruitment in the Indian Army is breaking with not a single Nepal domiciled Gorkha being recruited in the last four years.¹⁹

There are some major issues on which Nepal is dissenting. It says that the consent of all the parties is required before any change in the Tripartite Agreement takes place, and this scheme is a breach of the agreement. Nepal raised this issue by referencing Clause 4 of "The Memorandum of Agreement of Gorkha Troops", which states that Gorkha soldiers should be allowed to serve for the minimum time to qualify for pensions.²⁰ But the Agnipath scheme does not follow this clause because there is a limited tour of duty for only four years, and no provision of pension.

The issue of pensions is a worry for Nepal. As mentioned in the provisions of the Agnipath scheme, after four years of service, the Agniveers will not get any pension, since, in the Indian Army, a minimum of 10 years of service is a must to be eligible for a pension. Nepal fears that soon 75 per cent of its Gorkha soldiers will return to the country without a pension.²¹ A major portion of Nepal's economy

19. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "India-Nepal Bilateral Brief," February 2020, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/IndiaNepal_Bilateral_Brief_Feb_2020.pdf. Accessed on October 19, 2024.

20. Ethirajan, n. 9.

21. R. Bedi, "Why India Should Be Worried About Chinese Army's Plan to Recruit Nepali Gorkhas," *The Wire*, July 17, 2023, <https://m.thewire.in/article/world/india-china-army-nepali-gorkhas-worry>. Accessed on October 19, 2024.

comprises remittances from the Indian Army as pension to ex-Servicemen of the Gorkha regiments. There are 1,35,000 Indian Army retired Gorkhas in Nepal. They receive \$620 million in pensions from India, which amount is greater than Nepal's defence budget.²² According to the Indian Embassy in Nepal, significant changes have come in the life of Gorkha ex-Servicemen due to the One Rank One Pension (OPOR) scheme.

India is the biggest source of remittances for Nepal. It makes a significant contribution to Nepal's economy. So, this scheme will hurt Nepal's economy, and is having a disheartening influence on the youths of Nepal. They are now not keen to join either the Indian Army or the Nepal Army. India pays two and half times more salary in comparison to Nepal. Moreover, Nepal's Gorkha soldiers in the Indian Army get social and medical security benefits during their service and also after retirement. They are also worried about their future, post Agniveer scheme. In the Agnipath scheme, the Service conditions must be the same for both Indian and Nepalese soldiers. After the completion of their service, the Indian soldiers will get a 10 per cent reservation in CAPFs and Assam Rifles, but there is no such provision for the Gorkhas. Nepal raised this issue and referred to the treaty of 1950, which enforced the rights of Nepalese citizens to work in India, and also get equal treatment but nothing is clear now about the Gorkhas' recruitment in the CAPFs and other paramilitary forces.²³

Nepal's Prime Minister Kamal Dahal Prachand, during his visit to India, said, "Our people are serving not only in the Russian Army but also in the Ukraine Army."²⁴ Reports suggest that Russia has recruited as many as 15,800 soldiers in the army.²⁵ The Nepal government, however, is against the recruitment of Nepali citizens in the Russian Army, and has imposed a ban on its citizens visiting Russia or Ukraine for work and asked for the repatriation of all the

22. Ibid.

23. Singh, n. 7.

24. "Nepali Soldiers Employed in Both Russian and Ukrainian Armies: PM Prachanda," *Business Standard*, December 11, 2023. Accessed on October 20, 2024.

25. S. Pokharel and M. Chance, "Russia Has Recruited as Many as 15,000 Nepalese to Fight Its War," *CNN*, February 10, 2024, <https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2024/02/10/asia/nepal-fighters-russia-ukraine-families-intl-cmd>. Accessed on October 20, 2024.

recruited Nepalese. Recent reports have claimed that six Nepali citizens were killed in the war.²⁶ Nepali citizens have not only joined the Russian or Ukrainian Army, but some have also joined the French Foreign Legion.

INDIA'S STANCE

In a rapidly changing global geopolitical scenario, it is important for every country to work for the technological advancement and modernisation of its military. India is also making bold moves towards this. But in this process, there are economic restraints. With two rival nations at its doors, Pakistan and China, India needs to modernise its military. Promotion of Research and Development (R&D) in the defence sector is important. To counter these economic restraints, India has introduced the Agnipath scheme. This will gradually decrease the expenditure on pensions and shift it towards R&D. If we look at the defence budget for the last five years, it will be clear that India spent a large portion of the budget on pensions and salaries, while research had a lesser share (see Table 1)

Table 1: Trends in India's Defence Budget Allocation and Pension Expenditure

Budget Year	Defence Budget (in lakh crores)	Expenditure on Pension (in lakh crores)	Spent on Pension (in %)
2020-21	4.71	1.33	28.0
2021-22	4.78	1.16	24.2
2022-23	5.25	1.19	22.6
2023-24	5.94	1.38	23.3
2024-25	6.21	1.41	22.7

Source: Ministry of Defence, *Defence Budget of India Reports*, 2020-24.

India and Nepal have historic ties and the Gorkhas have been an integral part of these. The Gorkhas have shed their blood to safeguard the territorial integrity of India. Currently, there are 39 Gorkha units in the Indian Army. From these 39 units, the composition of soldiers

26. Mehta, n. 16.

is: 60 per cent Nepal Domiciled Gorkhas (NDGs), and 40 per cent Indian Domiciled Gorkhas (IDGs). Only one unit in the Indian Army is composed of IDGs.²⁷ At present, 32,000 Gorkha soldiers are serving in the Indian Army comprising 60 per cent NDGs.²⁸ India is responsible for nearly 13 per cent of all the inward remittances, and pays the pension and other services.²⁹

Nepal feels that with the large number of youths in India eligible for recruitment, India is closing the window for the Gorkhas. It is an independent decision for a country to recruit people from other countries, and doesn't close the doors for others. However, there is a lack of consensus between the two countries on this issue. Lieutenant General Prabhu Sharma, the chief of the Nepal Army who is an honorary general in the Indian Army, said that Nepal is not against the recruitment of Gorkhas in the Indian Army but opposes recruitment as Agniveers for a short duration service.³⁰ Some foreign writers have claimed that the Modi government is dismantling the British colonial legacy of the recruitment of Gorkhas in the Indian Army. However, the primary reason behind this move is economic. India did not stop the recruitment. It was the Nepal government which stopped its citizens from joining the Indian Army. Nepal cannot demand better rules, and all the rules applicable to the Agniveers will also apply to the Gorkhas.

India-Nepal relations are at an all-time low at this time and the growing influence of China in Nepal is a major security concern for India. Nepal signed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017. After this, China's influence over Nepal's strategic, economic, and commercial sectors has increased. Nepal conducted military exercises with China for the first time in 2017. In some recent published reports, it is mentioned that China is offering the Gorkhas a chance to join the People's Liberation Army (PLA). If this happens, it will be

27. A. S. Chauhan, "Will India's Agnipath Scheme Spell the End of the Gorkha Rifles?" *The Diplomat*, May 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/will-indias-agnipath-scheme-spell-the-end-of-the-gorkha-rifles/>. Accessed on October 20, 2024.

28. R. Gupta, "Is the Gorkhas' Place in India's History About to Change?" Lowy Institute, *The Interpreter*, 2023. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/gorkha-s-place-india-s-history-about-change>. Accessed on October 20, 2024.

29. Chauhan, n. 27.

30. Mehta, n. 16.

Gorkhas v/s Gorkhas on the Indo-China border. China will not miss any opportunity to provoke India. The Marxist leaders of Nepal have asked the Nepal government to not allow the recruitment of Gorkhas in the Indian Army because they would be deployed at the border with China, and Nepal has no conflict with China.

India's main objective behind the scheme is to develop skilled manpower in India. The youths will get an opportunity to serve the country. This will also decrease the average age of the Indian armed forces personnel. In case of an attack from a rival nation, India will have a large number of trained youths to wage war. It will also reduce the burden of pensions and salaries, and some other earlier benefits. These savings can be used for advancing military technology. But there is some disquiet in India also, with some people opposing this scheme, as earlier, they got full-time jobs and pensions.

It is expected that, shortly, the Gorkha regiment will comprise only IDGs. The number of battalions can be reduced because India does not have the numbers of Gorkhas to sustain seven regiments.³¹ The former Chief of the Army Staff, Manoj Pande has said that if they (Gorkhas) don't decide soon, their vacancies will be given to others. The numbers of the Gorkhas are depleting rapidly. India is planning to recruit people with the same traits from tribal areas within India, most likely from Kumaun, Garwal, Assam, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, etc. Recently, the Indian government has made proposals to the Nepal government regarding the resumption of Gorkha recruitment in the Indian Army. In fact, Indian Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi, during his visit to Nepal in November 2024, confirmed that the decision now rests with Nepal's political leadership.³²

31. G. Das, "Army's Gorkha Brigade Needs Reorganisation," *The Sunday Guardian*, 2024, <https://sundayguardianlive.com/opinion/armys-gorkha-brigade-needs-reorganisation#:~:text=An%20imminent%20shrinking%20of%20the,the%20Indian%20Republic%20to%20date>. Accessed on October 20, 2024.

32. I. A. Siddiqui, "Army Chief Upendra Dwivedi Makes Plea to Nepal for Gorkha Troops," *The Telegraph India*, January 15, 2025, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/army-chief-upendra-dwivedi-makes-plea-to-nepal-for-gorkha-troops/cid/2077516>. Accessed on January 26, 2025.

CONCLUSION

The Gorkhas have a significant place in the military history of India. They served in the British East India Company from 1815 to 1947. They fought several battles for the British and also participated in the great wars of the 20th century. After India's freedom from the British, a Tripartite Agreement was signed among India, Nepal, and Britain. Based on this agreement, the Gorkhas continued to be recruited into the Indian Army. They served in all the wars of India and showed their loyalty, discipline, and fighting potential. They are regarded as the most fearless soldiers.

In 2022, India introduced the Agnipath scheme for the recruitment of Personnel Below Officer Rank (PBOR). Nepal opposed this scheme because it had no provision for pension and the service duration was only four years. Nepal accused India of not informing it of such critical changes, and stopped the recruitment of its citizens in the Indian armed forces. India moved to the Agnipath scheme for the modernisation of its armed forces. India spends a large portion of its defence budget on the pensions and salaries of ex-Servicemen. This saved money will be used to advance its military technology. But due to a series of issues, India-Nepal relations are in turmoil.

Nepal has been inclining toward China, particularly since the late 1980s. The India-imposed trade embargo of 1989 and the economic blockade of 2015 significantly altered the dynamics of the Nepal-China relationship, as Nepal turned to China for economic and logistical support during these crises. This shift will create security problems for India, given Nepal's critical geographical and geopolitical position between the two giant powers, India and China. Nepal is of immense importance, and India cannot afford to allow it to drift further into China's sphere of influence. Adding to this concern, China has offered to recruit Nepalese Gorkhas into the PLA, further complicating the regional security landscape.

Given the criticality of the Gorkhas in the Indian Army, India could potentially give some concessions and exceptions by continuing the prevailing system of recruitment. India could consider providing the Gorkhas with some second career options, like recruitment in CAPFs and paramilitary forces as provided for the Indian Agniveers. A political consensus on this issue is needed. Both India and Nepal

need to find an operable and rational solution, and resolve this issue as soon as possible to stop further turmoil in the relations. In a recent speech, Defence Minister of India Rajnath Singh said that if it is necessary to change the Agnipath scheme to secure the future of the Agniveers, the government will be “open to change”.