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Mapping Indo-Nepal Relation Through Recent Developments: A Special Focus on Agnipath Scheme

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Abstract: The relationship between India and Nepal has become more difficult since Agnipath's scheme was implemented; this is especially the case with the recruitment of Nepali Gorkhas into the Indian army. Concerns have been expressed in Nepal, where Gorkha soldiers have long served in the Indian army with the expectations of long-term careers and perks over the short-term service model and the absence of guaranteed pensions for the majority of recruits. This change has not gone down well, especially in Nepal's rural economy. Political groups in Nepal have also expressed worries over sovereignty concerns, saying that the plan goes against Nepali interests.

Keywords: India- Nepal – strategic relationship, Gorkha regiment, Agnipath Scheme, Agniveer.

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1. Introduction

India and Nepal share a unique relationship that is shaped by historical, cultural, economic, and geopolitical ties. These countries have deep-rooted connections that date back centuries, marked by common religious traditions, shared borders, and open migration policies. However, their relationship has also experienced challenges due to political tensions and border disputes.

2. Key Aspects of India-Nepal Relations

Historical and Cultural Ties: Religious and Cultural Links: Both India and Nepal have strong cultural and religious connections, primarily due to Hinduism and Buddhism. Nepal is home to Lumbini, the birthplace of Lord Buddha, and India has many Hindu holy sites that are significant to Nepalis.

Language and Ethnic Connections: People across the border often speak the same or similar languages, and there are intermarriages between the people of both nations.

Political Relations: Treaty of Peace and Friendship (1950): This treaty serves as a foundation for diplomatic and economic cooperation between the two countries. It allows free movement of people and goods across the border and provides Nepal with access to Indian markets.

Bilateral Cooperation: Over the years, the two countries have signed various agreements related to trade, transit, defence, and mutual assistance. India has historically played a significant role in Nepal's development, providing aid, investments, and infrastructure development.

Economic Relations: Trade: India is Nepal's largest trading partner. Nepal imports most of its essential goods, including fuel, from India. Similarly, India is a significant market for Nepal's exports, including agricultural products and handicrafts.

Investment: Indian firms have substantial investments in Nepal, particularly in areas like hydropower, tourism, and manufacturing.

Strategic and Security Relations: Security Cooperation: India and Nepal cooperate closely on security issues, especially given Nepal's strategic location between India and China. The Indian Army has a tradition of recruiting Nepali citizens into the Gorkha regiments, and both armies conduct joint military exercises.

China's Influence: Nepal's growing closeness to China in recent years has been a point of concern for India. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and increasing investments in Nepal have altered the geopolitical dynamics in the region.

Border Disputes and Political Tensions: In recent years, border disputes have caused friction between the two countries. For example, the 2020 boundary dispute over the Kalapani-Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh region strained relations. Nepal issued a new political map showing these areas as part of its territory, which India opposed.

At times, political leadership in Nepal has expressed concerns over India's perceived dominance and intervention in Nepal's domestic affairs, further straining ties.

People-to-People Connections: The open border between India and Nepal allows for the free movement of people, making migration, trade, and personal relationships fluid between the two countries.

Large numbers of Nepalis live and work in India, contributing to strong people-to-people ties.

Nepal holds significant strategic, cultural, economic, and geopolitical importance to India due to various

factors. Here's a breakdown of the key reasons:

Geopolitical and Strategic Importance-

Buffer State Between India and China: Nepal is situated between India and China, two major global powers. Its location provides India with a strategic buffer from China, especially in the sensitive region of Tibet. A stable and friendly Nepal is seen as essential to counterbalance China's growing influence in South Asia. In recent years, China has invested heavily in Nepal's infrastructure and trade, making Nepal a critical arena of competition between India and China.

Border Security: India and Nepal share an open border of over 1,850 kilometres, making security cooperation crucial. The open border facilitates ease of movement but also poses challenges related to security, such as human trafficking, terrorism, and smuggling.

Economic and Trade Relations-

Trade and Transit: Nepal is a landlocked country and relies heavily on India for access to the sea, with about 60% of its foreign trade passing through Indian ports. India is Nepal's largest trading partner and the primary source of essential goods like petroleum and electricity.

Investment and Infrastructure: India is one of the biggest investors in Nepal, particularly in sectors like hydropower, infrastructure development, and tourism. Projects like the India-Nepal petroleum pipeline and cross-border railways are examples of this close economic cooperation.

Cultural and Religious Ties-

Deep Cultural and Historical Links: Nepal and India share a long history of cultural, religious, and historical ties. Both countries have predominantly Hindu populations, and there is a shared reverence for cultural landmarks like the Pashupatinath Temple in Nepal and the birthplace of Gautama Buddha in Lumbini.

People-to-People Relations: The people of Nepal and India enjoy close ties due to shared language, culture, and religion. Many people of Nepalese origin live and work in India, contributing to the strong social fabric connecting the two nations. The open border facilitates easy movement of citizens between the two countries, further strengthening these ties.

Security and Military Cooperation-

Gorkha Regiment: Nepalese soldiers, particularly the famed Gorkha regiment, have long served in the Indian Army. This tradition dates back to British colonial times and continues today, reflecting deep

military cooperation.

Defence and Intelligence Sharing: India and Nepal work closely on matters of defence and intelligence. Nepal is a key partner in combating terrorism and maintaining security in the sensitive Himalayan region.

Water Resources and Hydropower

Hydropower Potential: Nepal's rivers, many of which flow into India, have immense potential for hydropower generation. India has been involved in multiple hydroelectric projects in Nepal, such as the Arun III project, which has the potential to benefit both countries. These projects help in managing water resources for both irrigation and electricity generation.

Water Sharing: Rivers like the Ganga, Kosi, and Gandak flow from Nepal into India, making water-sharing agreements crucial for both nations. Flood management and river basin development are joint priorities due to the heavy reliance on these rivers for agriculture and livelihoods in northern India.

Soft Power and Diplomacy

SAARC and BIMSTEC Cooperation: Nepal and India are both members of regional organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). These platforms facilitate cooperation on regional security, trade, and diplomacy.

Indian Influence on Nepal's Political Landscape: India has historically played an influential role in Nepal's political transitions, including its shift from a monarchy to a republic. Political stability in Nepal is seen as essential for regional stability.

This is crystal clear that Nepal has been one of the most important neighbours as far as India is concerned. Both nations share multiple important relations starting from culture to politics, defence, and many more. Therein lies the relevance of this article. This article wishes to focus on the strategic security relationship between India and Nepal through the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, the impact of the Gorkha regiment in Indian armed forces and border security and the introduction of 'Agniveer' through 'Agnipath Scheme' with its immediate concrescences.

Leading into the main topic we shall first see the scheme that is Agneevir. Agniveer refers to the soldiers recruited under the Agnipath Scheme, which is a new recruitment policy introduced by the Government of India for the Indian Armed Forces in 2022. The aim of the scheme is to bring in a younger, fitter, and

more tech-savvy generation of soldiers into the military. While also addressing the financial burden of long-term pensions and benefits on the defence budget.

3. Key Features of the Agnipath Scheme

Recruitment of Agniveers: Under the Agnipath scheme, soldiers (called Agniveers) will be recruited for a short-term period of four years into the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force.

The recruitment is open to individuals aged between 17.5 and 21 years, and they are expected to undergo rigorous training to prepare them for their roles.

Service Duration: Agniveers will serve a four-year tenure in the Armed Forces. This includes both the training period and active service. After four years, only a portion (around 25%) of the recruits will be retained for further service, based on performance, while the rest will be discharged.

Permanent Retention: After completing the four-year service, Agniveers will have the opportunity to apply for a permanent position in the armed forces. Those who are not retained will be assisted in transitioning into civilian life, with options for further education, employment, and skill development.

Financial Benefits: Agniveers will receive a competitive salary during their service, starting at approximately ₹30,000 per month, with incremental increases over the four years.

At the end of their tenure, they will receive a "Seva Nidhi" package, which is a one-time payout of around ₹11-12 lakhs (without pension benefits). This amount is partly funded by their own contributions, along with matching contributions from the government.

No Pension or Gratuity: Unlike regular soldiers, Agniveers will not receive a pension or gratuity upon the completion of their four-year service, except for those who are retained for permanent positions in the armed forces.

Post-Service Opportunities: The government has proposed multiple avenues to support Agniveers in post-service employment. These include preferences in government jobs (such as paramilitary forces or public sector undertakings), and skill certifications that will help them secure employment in the private sector.

Focus on Youth and Technology: The scheme is aimed at creating a younger military force. It is designed to reduce the average age of soldiers in the armed forces, making them more agile and adaptable to modern warfare technologies and strategies.

3.1. Objectives of the Agnipath Scheme

Reducing the Defence Pension Bill: The scheme is expected to reduce the long-term financial burden of defence pensions, which has been increasing over the years. By introducing short-term service without pensions for a majority of recruits, the government can reallocate resources to modernize the armed forces.

Modernization of the Armed Forces: With younger, tech-savvy soldiers, the Agnipath scheme is expected to bring in fresh perspectives and adaptability, particularly in the context of increasing automation, cyber warfare, and modern defence technologies.

Youth Employment: The scheme provides an opportunity for a large number of young people to experience military service and gain skills that can be transferred to civilian employment after completing their tenure.

Nationalism and Discipline: The scheme is also expected to instil a sense of patriotism, discipline, and national service among the youth, even if they do not serve in the military beyond the initial four years.

3.2. Challenges and Criticism

Job Security Concerns: Many have raised concerns about the lack of long-term job security for those who are not retained after four years. Since only 25% of the Agniveers are expected to be retained, a large majority will need to find new careers, which may be challenging without a pension or job guarantee.

Protests and opposition: When the scheme was first introduced, there were widespread protests across various parts of India, with some groups expressing dissatisfaction over the short service period and the uncertainty of post-service opportunities. Many felt that the Agnipath scheme undermined the traditional recruitment and pension structure of the Indian Armed Forces.

Impact on morale and cohesion: Some critics have voiced concerns that short-term recruitment may affect the morale, cohesiveness, and experience levels of the armed forces, particularly in situations where unit cohesion and long-term dedication are critical for operations.

Impact on defence capability: The potential reduction in the number of experienced personnel over time, with a constant inflow and outflow of short-term recruits, could impact the overall defence capability, particularly in specialized and technical roles.

Government response and reforms: In response to the concerns, the government has reiterated the importance of the Agnipath scheme in modernizing the military and reducing long-term costs. To address

the worries about post-service employment, the government has announced initiatives to help Agniveers transition to civilian life, including job preferences in government sectors and opportunities in private industries.

3.3. Impact of the Scheme on Gorkha Regiments

The Agnipath scheme, and the recruitment of Agniveers, may have certain implications for the Indo-Nepal relationship, particularly in the context of the historical recruitment of Gorkhas from Nepal into the Indian Army. The Gorkhas have long been an essential part of India's armed forces, and any changes to military recruitment policies could affect Nepal in various ways. Below are some potential effects of the Agnipath scheme on Indo-Nepal relations:

Impact on Gorkha recruitment:

Traditional recruitment of Gorkhas: For decades, the Indian Army has recruited Gorkhas from Nepal under the provisions of the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship. The treaty allows Nepali citizens to serve in the Indian military, and thousands of Nepali Gorkhas have served in various regiments, especially the Gorkha Rifles.

Short-term service and lack of pension: Under the Agnipath scheme, Agniveers will serve only for four years, and a majority of them will not receive a pension. This may lead to reluctance among Nepali youths to join the Indian Army, as the traditional appeal of a long-term military career and pension benefits might be reduced. The pension system has been a significant incentive for Gorkha soldiers and their families in Nepal, offering financial security after retirement.

Nepal's reaction to the scheme:

Concerns in Nepal: There has been some concern regarding the impact of the Agnipath scheme on Gorkha recruitment. Nepalese authorities and civil society have expressed apprehension about how this short-term contract-based service may affect the future employment prospects of Nepali youths who traditionally look to the Indian Army for stable employment.

Diplomatic discussions: The Government of Nepal has sought clarification from India regarding the future of Gorkha recruitment under the Agnipath scheme. It is likely that both nations will engage in diplomatic discussions to ensure that recruitment policies are aligned with mutual interests, especially considering the historical ties between the two countries.

Reduction in military engagement:

Decrease in Gorkha numbers: If fewer Nepali youths are interested in joining the Indian Army due to the Agnipath scheme's terms, it could lead to a reduction in the number of Gorkhas serving in the Indian military. This could, in turn, weaken one of the important military linkages between India and Nepal.

Impact on people-to-people ties: The recruitment of Gorkhas into the Indian Army has long served as a bridge between the two countries, fostering strong people-to-people ties. Any significant changes to this recruitment process could potentially affect the cultural and familial bonds that have been built over generations.

Socio-economic impact in Nepal:

Economic contribution: Remittances sent home by Nepali Gorkhas serving in the Indian Army have been an important source of income for many families in Nepal. The Agnipath scheme's short-term service and lack of pension benefits may reduce the long-term financial support that Nepali soldiers traditionally provide to their families.

Fewer career opportunities: For many Nepali youths, joining the Indian Army has provided stable and prestigious career opportunities. With the introduction of the Agnipath scheme, the short duration of service and uncertainty regarding post-service opportunities could make it less attractive to Nepal's younger population.

Potential Shifts in Recruitment to Other Forces:

Gorkhas in other countries: In addition to serving in the Indian Army, Gorkhas have historically been recruited into the British Army's Brigade of Gurkhas, as well as the military forces of other nations like Singapore and Brunei. If the Agnipath scheme makes Indian Army service less appealing, Nepali youths may seek out opportunities to serve in these other armies.

Increased migration to other countries: Reduced opportunities in the Indian Army could potentially lead to an increase in migration from Nepal to other countries for employment, particularly in sectors like construction, hospitality, and security services in the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Diplomatic and strategic relations:

Nepal's growing ties with China: The Agnipath scheme's impact on Indo-Nepal military relations could be a factor in Nepal's broader strategic balancing act between India and China. As China increases its economic and strategic presence in Nepal, any weakening of military ties with India could give China

more leverage in the region.

Diplomatic sensitivities: If the Agnipath scheme leads to significant changes in Gorkha recruitment, India will need to handle the situation diplomatically, ensuring that Nepal's concerns are addressed and that historical ties are maintained. A failure to do so could lead to friction in bilateral relations, at a time when regional dynamics are becoming more complex due to China's influence.

Policy flexibility: It is possible that the Indian government may make special provisions for the recruitment of Gorkhas from Nepal under the Agnipath scheme, addressing some of the concerns related to service duration and post-service benefits. This could help maintain the traditional recruitment model while adapting to the modern needs of the Indian military.

Continued diplomatic engagement: The embassies of both countries are likely to engage in discussions to ensure that the new recruitment policies do not disrupt the long-standing military relationship. Any adjustments or assurances regarding the recruitment of Gorkhas could help ease tensions and maintain the historical bond between the two nations.

4. Conclusion

As a strategic ally and a historical friend, Nepal has always been faithful and in the current scenario, India least afford to lose the ties. It is evident that the relationship between the two countries is not in the shape either of them wishes to. Especially, recent agitation in Nepal (in youth who are looking for a career in India) against Indian policies are there to be seen. Direct effect on the Gorkha regiment has created a deep-rooted wound in Nepal's heart and the government there has already posted its grievance stating that India has violated the historical agreements regarding military ties. This is where India has to be a bit more diplomatic and flexible. To address the challenges created by the Agnipath Scheme in the context of India-Nepal relations, a thoughtful and diplomatic approach is essential. Here are some potential ways out:

Bilateral Dialogue and Diplomacy

Engage in Formal Consultations: India and Nepal should initiate formal dialogues to discuss the specific concerns related to the Agnipath scheme and its impact on the recruitment of Gorkhas into the Indian Army. This can be done through diplomatic channels, military-to-military talks, and government-level discussions.

The involvement of Nepalese political leadership and key stakeholders would help ensure transparency

and find common ground, preserving the tradition of Gorkha recruitment while adapting to the new structure.

Special Provisions for Gorkhas

Tailored Recruitment Policy: India could consider creating a special provision for Gorkha recruits from Nepal within the Agnipath scheme. This could involve adjusting the tenure or offering more favourable terms such as better benefits, a higher probability of permanent absorption, or even longer service durations than those offered to Indian nationals under the scheme.

Providing pension benefits or alternative long-term employment options post-service, particularly for Nepali Gorkhas, would address concerns about job security and economic stability.

Strengthening the 1947 Tripartite Agreement

Renegotiating the Tripartite Agreement: India and Nepal, along with the UK (the other party in the agreement), could revisit the 1947 Tripartite Agreement to modernize and align it with the Agnipath scheme. A refreshed understanding of the recruitment terms, particularly for Gorkhas, could provide a mutually agreeable framework for future military cooperation.

Such discussions would ensure that the new terms do not violate the spirit of the original agreement while allowing for adjustments in India's defence policy.

Economic Alternatives for Nepalese Youth

Provide Economic Opportunities for Gorkha Veterans: Given the reduced service duration and lack of pensions for many under the Agnipath scheme, India could assist in creating alternative economic opportunities for Nepali youth post-service.

This could involve vocational training programs, employment assistance, and entrepreneurship support either in India or Nepal, ensuring that Gorkha veterans are economically secure even after completing their short-term military service.

India could work with the Nepalese government to fund and implement these programs, demonstrating goodwill and a long-term commitment to Nepal's development.

Encourage Regional Cooperation on Security and Employment

Regional Security and Employment Initiatives: India and Nepal could cooperate on broader security and employment initiatives, particularly in the border regions where many Gorkhas are recruited. A joint

initiative to improve infrastructure, enhance job prospects, and develop the local economy would reduce the dependency on military recruitment as a primary source of employment for Nepali youth.

Such initiatives could include the development of cross-border industries, enhanced tourism, and infrastructure projects where Gorkha soldiers could use their skills after completing their Agnipath service.

Incorporate Gorkhas in Peacekeeping and Multinational Forces

Leveraging Gorkha Experience in International Peacekeeping: India could explore opportunities to deploy Gorkha soldiers from Nepal in United Nations peacekeeping missions or other multinational defence operations. These soldiers, after completing their four years of Agnipath service, could be utilized in such roles, allowing them to continue in meaningful military or defense-related careers.

This would not only benefit India and Nepal but also enhance the role of both nations in international peacekeeping efforts, utilizing the combat skills and discipline of the Gorkha troops.

Long-Term Vision for Gorkha Recruitment

Long-Term Planning for Gorkha Recruitment: India should take a long-term view of its recruitment strategy for Nepali Gorkhas. This could involve a hybrid model where traditional recruitment (with full benefits) and Agnipath-style short-term recruitment coexist. Such an arrangement would allow Gorkhas to choose between a short-term contract or a long-term military career with pension benefits.

India should also consider the strategic value of Gorkha soldiers in the broader context of its defence policy. The Gorkhas have a strong historical reputation and serve as a symbol of the deep ties between India and Nepal, so preserving this relationship through meaningful reforms would be beneficial for both sides.

Address Domestic Political Concerns in Nepal

Engage Nepal's Political Leadership: To prevent the Agnipath scheme from becoming a political issue in Nepal, India should proactively engage Nepalese political parties and address their concerns about the scheme's potential exploitation of Nepali youth.

India could offer reassurances that the new recruitment policy is designed to benefit both nations and that measures will be put in place to protect the long-term interests of Gorkha soldiers and their families.

Enhancing India's Public Diplomacy in Nepal

Improving Perceptions of Agnipath: Through targeted public diplomacy, India can work to enhance

perceptions of the Agnipath scheme in Nepal. India could highlight the potential benefits of the scheme, such as the skills and training Gorkha recruits would receive, which could be useful in both military and civilian careers.

Initiatives such as media outreach, engagement with local communities, and showcasing the success stories of Agniveers could help alleviate concerns in Nepal and present a more positive narrative around the scheme.

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