EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

07-11-2026

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GS 3: ENVIRONMENT THE HINDU PAGE: 05

SC says curbs on vehicles and construction are 'failed tools'

Court asks Centre if it has scientific solutions to pollution; govt. says CAQM measures not complete failure; urbanisation, festive activities, stubble burning make pollution control uphill task, it says

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday termed measures such as banning vehicles and construction to curb air pollution in the national capital as "old, tried and failed tools".

A Bench, headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, asked the Union government and the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) if they had any "significant scientific method other than stopping vehicles and stopping construction".

Additional Solicitor-General Aishwarya Bhati, arguing for the CAQM and the Centre, said that it would not be completely true to call such measures a "complete failure". Ms. Bhati said emergency and pre-emptive measures like Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) have at least been able to arrest air pollution at sustainable levels.

"For us, it is either 'severe' and 'very severe'. 'Very poor' is normal. We are already touching 400. Let us not talk about a utopia where the AQI would become 100 or less," Justice Joymalya Bagchi, on the three-judge Bench, addressed the CAQM.

> Any vehicle can come to Delhi... You cannot monitor what kind of fuel is being used, what kind of pollution they are generating. What is the overall condition of these vehicles? Is there a mechanism to check? But even if you tell them to go back, the damage would already have been done
>
> **JUSTICE JOYMALYA BAGCHI**
> Supreme Court judge



"But every human activity, particularly in a festive season, will cause pollution. How much can we stop? Delhi invites and attracts talent and search for livelihoods from across the country. There is also a little stubble burning. In many ways, we are only doing management. But human activities have expanded so fast that we are still catching up to it," Ms. Bhati said.

The exchange in open court happened merely hours before the national capital graduated to GRAP-III restrictions with the air quality index rising over 400. The court said the "commodification and commercialisation" of Deepavali by affluent, status-driven people has worsened air pollution. The poorest sections of the population, who cannot afford the splurge, often bear the worst consequences.

The CJI said it was "free for all" on the capital's roads. Even improving the fuel would not change the pollution statistics.

"Any vehicle can come to Delhi... You cannot monitor what kind of fuel is being used, what kind of pollution they are generating; What is the overall condition of these vehicles? Is there a mechanism to check? But even if you tell them to go back, the damage would already have been done," the CJI addressed the government's law officer.

Chief Justice Kant said no orders from the court could possibly clear the thickening smog unless the public decided to mend their ways. Justice V. Mohana suggested awareness campaigns as a desperate measure to reign in the toxic air.

The judge said people need to revert to the "original customs and cultural practices" around Deepavali. "Going back to *diyas* and the simple things in life, that would be ideal," *amicus curiae*, senior advocate Aparajita Singh, agreed.

Senior advocate Sanjiv Sen, who appeared for the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), faced questions about the long trail of vehicles lying idle at Delhi borders. Mr. Sen said the only way that could be prevented during Deepavali would be to ban people from rushing to and fro with gifts.

The court agreed to pass directions, and list the case after the Deepavali vacations.

GS 3: INTERNAL SECURITY (CYBER SECURITY)
THE HINDU PAGE: 05

Cybercriminals have no place in society, says Supreme Court

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday said cybercriminals do not deserve anything more than being locked up in jail.

"They have no space in society," Chief Justice Surya Kant, heading a three-judge Bench, said orally while rejecting a bail plea by an accused in a cyber-fraud case.

"We are ruthless about cybercriminals. There is no sympathy coming from us. Cybercriminals have no space in society, and jails are only meant for them," the Chief Justice said. The court said even murderers have a chance of being rehabilitated, but not cyber-fraudsters. "You can release murderers. They can be rehabilitated. But not cybercriminals. They should not be anywhere but in jail," he said.



The SC rejects a bail plea and stresses that cyber fraudsters belong behind bars.

Cyber safeguards

Recently, the same Bench mandated Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and mechanisms to curb cyber fraud and to facilitate time-bound refunds after hearing the grievances of victims. It also directed law enforcement agencies to initiate criminal action through zero FIRs against cyberfraudsters.

The court had referred to a status report by the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) of the Ministry of Home Affairs, which said that complaints on the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal against digital arrests had fallen from 1,23,672 in 2024 to 58,249 in 2025, and stood at 16,377 for the period ending June 30, 2026. It had said the e-Zero FIR mechanism was functional in 19 States, while only 14 States had notified their State Cyber Crime Coordination Centres. The Telecommunications (Radio Equipment Possession Authorisation) Rules, 2025, have been notified, while the Telecommunications (User Identification) Rules, 2025, were at the final stage of notification.

GS 2: ROLE OF NGO'S AND CIVIL SOCIETIES
THE HINDU PAGE: 05

REACH becomes first Indian civil society group to get Kochon Prize

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Resource group for Education and Advocacy for Community Health (REACH), a not-for-profit organisation working to strengthen the tuberculosis (TB) response in India, has been awarded the Kochon Prize 2026, becoming the first civil society, non-profit organisation from India to receive this prestigious global recognition for its contributions to combating TB, a press release said.

Presented by the Kochon Foundation, an independent Korean non-profit foundation, in partnership with the Stop TB Partnership, the Kochon Prize recognises individuals and organisations that have made significant contributions to the fight against TB.

The 2026 Kochon Prize is shared by REACH, the Centre for Health Solutions, Kenya, and the Marshall Islands TB Control Program.



REACH has been honoured for its contributions to fighting tuberculosis. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

"Treat the person, not the disease - our journey with TB communities has been just that. We realised early on that overcoming barriers to care means addressing more than clinical needs - it means recognising social, community, family, mental health and situational challenges. That is the essence of integrated care: seeing the whole person, understanding their realities, and doing whatever it takes to ensure that no one is left behind," said Nalini Krishnan, chairperson and co-founder, REACH.

"REACH is a remarkable and rare organisation that has been consistently ahead of the curve in terms of public health action, and particularly in the field of TB. A women-led organisation, they genuinely care about the people they're supporting, beyond the numbers, data and reports to donor. However, they combine this with a robust scientific and technical approach and a shrewd understanding of the public health landscape in the country," said Soumya Swaminathan, chairperson, M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation and former chief scientist, WHO, who nominated REACH for the award.

"This recognition is testimony to the dedication of the community health workers, TB Nanbans and TB Champions who work alongside us, and to the families who have placed their trust in us. We are deeply grateful to their unwavering commitment and fortitude, " said Ramya Ananthakrishnan, director, REACH.

GS 3: ECONOMY THE HINDU PAGE: 06

Demonetisation and the health costs of cash shortages

Anindya Chakrabarti

Associate Professor of Economics at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad

Chirantan Chatterjee

Professor of Economics at U-Sussex and a 2025 Founding Fellow of the Royal Economic Society

Samarth Gupta

Assistant Professor of Economics at the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta

Research shows the hidden public health costs of India's demonetisation and the importance of liquidity

On November 8, 2016, 86% of India's currency by value was demonetised at four hours' notice, ostensibly to curb black money and counterfeit currency and promote digital payments. Nearly 99.3% of the withdrawn notes returned to the banking system, according to the Reserve Bank of India. Research has shown that the exercise caused a temporary contraction in money supply.

Kenya in 2019 and Nigeria in 2022-23 experienced similar cash shortages after currency withdrawals. As digital public infrastructure expands, an important question remains: how do sudden cash shortages affect access to essential goods such as medicines?

Acute versus chronic, a natural lens

This is the focus of forthcoming research by these writers in the *Journal of Economics and Management Strategy*. The All India Organisation of Chemists and Druggists (AIOCD) database was used using monthly sales of every stock keeping unit (SKU) across 805 pharmaceutical firms, 31 regions and 18 illness categories. It is the first product-region-time level dataset used to study demonetisation. Building on sound economic theory of search costs, the writers theorised that drugs for chronic conditions, purchased monthly, compel consumers to find the cheaper options. Drugs for acute conditions such as infections, pain, gastro-intestinal are bought due to unanticipated onset for a short duration, with less opportunity to search. The writers borrowed these ideas on search costs from Alan Sorensen and his influential *Journal of Political Economy* study published in 2000.

When a household faces a sudden cash constraint, which purchase is more likely to be deferred? The expensive, unplanned, unsearched item. That is what was found in the data. Using a difference-in-differences design accounting for dynamic region, company and illness variations at the molecule level, it was found that sales volume for acute drugs fell by nearly 3.6% and value by 3.1% relative to chronic drugs. This was not driven by products exiting the market or by price hikes - the number of unique SKUs and inter-quartile range of prices remained unchanged. It was a pure intensive margin contraction.

Two alternative explanations did not hold. Prescription data from IQVIA, a global provider of health information and analytics, and outbreak data from the Government of India's Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP) showed no break in prescription trends or acute disease outbreaks around the time of demonetisation.

The paper by these writers overall complements the literature that has found small or zero elasticity of health care to wealth shocks in insured, developed economies in prior work. In a setting such as India with high out-of-pocket expenditure, cash can essentially be binding for essential purchases.

Lessons for the future

Overall, the study highlights global lessons for any economy contemplating such measures. First, while the stated objectives for currency replacement may differ, cash dependence is similar. Das *et al.* ask whether going cashless made one tax-rich, finding only modest tax gains in the Indian experiment in a paper in the *Journal of Public Economics*. Understanding welfare costs upfront is also important. The implication is not about intent – which was to address legitimate policy concerns – but about distributional impact. Essential medicines behaved differently from other goods. Search costs matter for essential goods. The test by these writers covering product characteristics, inventory-channel, physician behaviour and price rigidity ruled out several competing explanations. While observational data cannot rule out all mechanisms, the search-cost interpretation is consistent across checks. It complements work on price elasticity and transparency.

Second, a public health buffer helps. Complementing AIOCD with HMIS public health centre data, we find areas with lower public health infrastructure saw larger declines.

Physician behaviour and disease incidence did not change, but poorer, under-served regions consumed fewer acute drugs. Thus, PHC density mitigated the shock. Post-2016, India has significantly expanded Jan Aushadhi Kendras, AB-PMJAY, and UPI-based payment options at pharmacies, which improve resilience for future shocks. Explicitly incorporating a health-sector protocol – for instance, ensuring credit lines or digital payment facilitation at pharmacies – during any large-scale currency operation would be prudent. Prior literature on out-of-pocket payments underscores this.

Need for better data

Third, there needs to be better data to measure welfare. The analysis by these writers captures drug sales, but not household-level health outcomes due to data limitations. Ten years later, building linked consumption-health datasets and, where such extreme instruments are considered, requiring a pre-registered evaluation protocol would enable more precise causal estimation.

On November 14, 2016, an economist wrote: "ATM lines are long, but PayTM is up. Should be fine." For many, it was. Digital adoption did accelerate as economists like Crouzet *et al.* have documented and counterfeit stock was reduced overnight. For the mother in Bihar however, deciding whether to buy Amoxycillin that week, the data suggests it was harder.

Liquidity, these writers' findings suggest, is an economic determinant of health. Recognising this can help make future monetary and public health policy more resilient and inclusive.

GS 2: POLITY
THE HINDU PAGE: 06

Epic failures

The electoral roll cannot be used to determine welfare beneficiaries

Union Panchayati Raj Minister Rajiv Ranjan Singh's statement that voter identity cards, with biometric authentication, will replace Aadhaar as the basis for identifying beneficiaries and making payments under his Ministry's schemes runs contrary to existing laws and regulations. Essentially, the electoral roll, prepared in several States through the flawed Special Intensive Revision (SIR) by the Election Commission of India (ECI), will become the dataset to vet the identities of beneficiaries. This contradicts the Supreme Court's May 27 judgment on the Bihar SIR and its observations while hearing petitions against West Bengal's orders removing people deleted during the SIR from the Public Distribution System and the Annapurna Yojana. The Court held that the ECI may undertake only a "limited enquiry" into citizenship to decide who belongs on the electoral roll, and that "any action taken pursuant thereto is confined to electoral consequences alone". The consequence of deletion from the rolls, it said, is "correspondingly limited" to a person's place on the roll and their right to vote. The Court also called the EPIC "a derivative document, issued on the basis of inclusion in the electoral roll", and held that relying on it to verify that very roll would defeat the exercise. It is ironic that Mr. Singh now wants this "derivative document" to be the determinant of welfare benefits.

Not every citizen is an eligible voter, and tying benefits to the electoral roll is illogical and also cruel. In West Bengal, lakhs were deleted from the rolls, many for dubious "logical discrepancies". In the appeals heard for reinstatement, 93% resulted in the restoration of names by September 2026, pointing to massive pre-election disenfranchisement. The Court has stated that it is yet to adjudicate on the legality of the ECI's "logical discrepancies" method. The SIR was designed by the ECI to restrict enrolment through stringent residency criteria; thus, itinerant voters had to prove their eligibility. The Opposition, civil society and even some of the BJP's allies have objected to this, but the BJP refuses to acknowledge the SIR's flaws. This is partly because it has benefited from disenfranchisement – as in West Bengal. But the Minister's remarks suggest another reason. The BJP-led coalition sees the pruned electoral rolls as a way to limit welfare, especially at a time when growth in tax revenues has slowed because of the Centre's policies. Inordinately delaying the Census, changing the procedure to appoint Election Commissioners, who then run an exercise that disenfranchises millions by design, and now, using the resultant rolls to decide who gets welfare, all cut at the heart of the painstakingly built constitutional welfare state. The sooner the Court decides the petitions against the SIR, and reiterates that its rolls cannot be used to curtail welfare, the better.

GS 3: ENVIRONEMNT
INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 12

Tackling air pollution requires science-based plan, not just GRAP



GUFRAN BEIG

IT IS heartening to note the seriousness with which authorities have planned a slew of measures under Delhi's Winter Action Plan, which commenced on November 1. These include restrictions on the entry of Delhi vehicles that do not comply with BS-IV standards, the "No PUCC, No Fuel" policy and construction curbs. However, the first day of the Action Plan brought a dose of despair: The air turned "Very Poor" after a prolonged pause, reminding us that something vital is still missing. While authorities appear prepared to implement the Action Plan, experts must do more to ensure that it is firmly grounded in science.

Two major concerns demand serious attention: An immediate shift towards airshed-based mitigation and a decisive move away from quick fixes and removing the illusion that GRAP, by itself, can deliver meaningful and sustained reductions in air pollution. I shall elaborate on these shortly.

Weather vagaries are increasingly emerging as formidable factors that influence air quality under rapidly changing climate conditions. This year, the onset of Delhi's peak pollution season has been delayed by almost two weeks, with Super El Niño potentially playing a leading role. Let us understand why. Cyclone Arnab and its associated unexpected rainfall further delayed its onset. At the heart of this unusual delay was a climatic tug-of-war between sluggish wind speeds and the delayed onset of a milder winter. While slow winds favour pollution accumulation, a delayed and milder winter tends to keep pollution levels relatively lower. Both phenomena are possible footprints of the unprecedented Super El Niño — they are consistent with recent NIAS research which demonstrates a strong connection between ENSO and air pollution. The delayed winter appears to have won the first round, keeping pollution in check and pushing back the onset of the poor air season.

Paddy harvesting in neighbouring Punjab and Haryana was also delayed because of the uncertainty caused by rainfall deficits. NASA's MODIS sensors aboard Terra and Aqua may continue to miss many stubble-burning fires because the satellites pass over Punjab and Haryana at times when the fires are not yet burning or have already died down. This mismatch has become much more pronounced since 2023, making NASA fire counts increasingly unreliable. According to reliable reports, more than 90 per cent of stubble-burning events in Punjab during 2024 and 2025 occurred after 3 PM, compared with less than 3 per cent in 2021. South Korea's Korea Multi-Purpose Satellite-2A (KOMPSAT-2A) is beginning to reveal a substantially different picture through its Advanced Meteorological Imager (AMI), which, being geostationary, maps areas continuously. It is detecting abundant agricultural fires in Punjab, with fire counts orders of magnitude higher than those indicated by official estimates. NIAS air-quality modelling further reinforces this concern. When realistic additional stubble-burning emissions are incorporated, the model reproduces the abrupt rise in measured PM2.5 levels observed on November 1, attributing approximately 20 per cent of Delhi's PM2.5 burden to stubble burning. Such a magnitude of pollution cannot be adequately predicted using historical averages of recent years' fire data or NASA's conventional fire counts. After all, any model can deliver realistic predictions only when supplied with realistic real-world inputs. The sooner authorities recognise this changing ground reality and subscribe to appropriate satellite data, the sooner we can improve emissions estimates and air-quality forecasts. Proper diagnosis is the prerequisite for effective treatment, and air-pollution management is no exception.

> Two concerns demand serious attention: An immediate shift towards airshed-based mitigation and a decisive move away from quick fixes

On the policy front, unless Delhi adopts an airshed-based approach, it would effectively address only 50-70 per cent of the emission sources impacting the city, even before accounting for the additional contribution from stubble burning. A recent NIAS study, undertaken under a project of the Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India, proposes a paradigm shift in India's air-quality management through an indigenous framework, "AIRSHEDEM". It demonstrates how airshed-based master planning can potentially bring mitigation planning closer to a near-100 per cent source coverage. This approach focuses on a pragmatic middle ground that is neither the entire NCR nor restricted to Delhi NCT. This could provide a scientifically sound and administratively feasible framework for effective mitigation.

The second issue is GRAP. I see a compelling clinical analogy here: GRAP is akin to an ICU intervention for a chronic patient. Emergency treatment is essential to stabilise the patient and provide immediate relief, but it cannot cure the underlying disease. It also comes at the cost of repeated public inconvenience. A science-based action plan requires focused, sustained treatment of the diagnosed causes. Similarly, GRAP's emergency restrictions are necessary when pollution peaks, but they cannot substitute for structural, long-term emission reduction. That is the key.

The next 30-40 days are likely to be particularly challenging. Stubble burning, unstable early-winter meteorology and intermittent high-emission episodes could continue to haunt Delhi's air quality. The prospect of these factors converging in the second week of November is high. The next two months may prove even more difficult as deeper winter brings local fog as well as fog carried into Delhi from the Indo-Gangetic Plain, potentially worsened by an ENSO-related decline in western disturbances — the weather systems that periodically bring rain and atmospheric relief. Combined with significantly slower winds, these conditions could leave Delhi's atmosphere choked. Of course, year-round priorities must not be lost sight of amid the seasonal crisis. Traffic congestion at junctions, poorly maintained roads, ineffective traffic management and open waste burning remain persistent sources of pollution that demand sustained attention. Delhi needs to move beyond repeatedly managing pollution episodes towards addressing their underlying causes through comprehensive airshed-based planning, sustained emission reduction and science-based policy implementation.

The writer is chair professor, National Institute of Advanced Studies, IISc Campus, and founder project director, SAFAR

GS 3: ECONOMY
INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 12

To attract foreign capital, welcome it loudly and clearly



NIHARIKA YADAV

NET FDI in India has gone down from $40 billion in FY2021 to effectively zero in FY2025. There are attempts to address this, including a rationalisation of the foreign investment framework through the draft Foreign Investment Rules (FI Rules) released by the RBI. The draft Rules are a mixed bag, with some positive changes such as shorter sections, an investee-centred framework and harmonised definitions. However, these are operational revisions that are in themselves insufficient for achieving the RBI's objective of creating a "contemporary, user-friendly investment framework" or materially improving India's investment climate. The binding constraint is India's suspicious approach towards foreign capital, and it requires a deeper, first-principles overhaul of the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA).

To make progress on global economic engagement, the Indian state needs to do two things. One, it should signal, loud and clear, to foreign funds evaluating competing emerging market options that capital is welcome in India. Two, it should keep the friction between a commercial decision and its execution near zero. These objectives are hard to reconcile with the present law. Under Section 6 of FEMA, capital account transactions remain prohibited unless specifically permitted by the RBI or the government, so everything built above it, including the draft FI Rules, essentially serves as a schedule of exceptions to a default state of restriction.

India operates an extended web of capital controls under FEMA. Foreign capital is prohibited in sectors such as real estate business, and capped in others such as digital media, broadcasting, multi-brand retail and pensions. This makes India an outlier among significant economies, alongside China. No OECD country maintains general capital and exchange controls, and even emerging economies such as Chile and Mexico have avoided transaction-by-transaction regulation of the capital account.

Even in fully open sectors, the Indian state regulates individual transactions between private parties, prescribing the instrument the money may come through, the legal form the recipient may take, and the price the parties may agree on. For instance, transfers of unlisted shares between residents and non-residents require certified valuations before transaction, with the draft FI Rules further narrowing the latitude. This can force parties to transact at mandated prices rather than negotiate commercially, causing serious friction. If the concern is tax evasion, it should be addressed after the transaction, not through ex-ante controls.

These difficulties were papered over in earlier years and avoided scrutiny due to global interest in India and low interest rates worldwide. However, the same gaps are creating significant economic problems today and require a better design of the FEMA. Much of this work has been done in existing expert committee reports by Tarapore, Percy Mistry, U K Sinha, and the FSLRC.

Three key principles follow.

First, any restriction on capital flows should be exercised with caution, imposed temporarily, based on publicly stated objectives, and used as an emergency measure for managing macroeconomic risk. For national security objectives, screening mechanisms should be set up with adequate checks and balances. This should bring together departments with competing mandates to weigh the national security risk against the cost of restricting capital. Press Note 3, for instance, which restricts investment by nationality, should not have been issued by DPIIT alone, whose mandate is to promote investment. The US and UK offer good examples in the CFIUS and Investment Security Unit, respectively.

Second, rulemaking should involve public consultation, cost-benefit analysis and review. The FSLRC argues that restrictions should operate principally at the point of entry, and that once entry requirements are satisfied, foreign investors should receive national treatment comparable to domestic investors.

Third, controls should be tested against three criteria: Neutrality as to the vehicle through which money enters, neutrality as to who is investing, and a discipline tying each restriction to an identified market failure.

Restrictions on capital carry costs that emerge slowly, as investments not made and firms not built. India's approach must internalise this through a first-principles overhaul of its primary foreign exchange statute. Without that, tactical adjustments such as the draft FI Rules are unlikely to alter the status quo.

The writer is research lead, XKDR Forum

Restrictions on capital carry costs that emerge slowly, as investments not made and firms not built. India's approach must internalise this through a first-principles overhaul of its primary foreign exchange statute

GS 3: INTERNAL SECURITY
INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 13

Agnipath revision must be judged by what it does to institution it was meant to reform



SUDHIR PILLAI

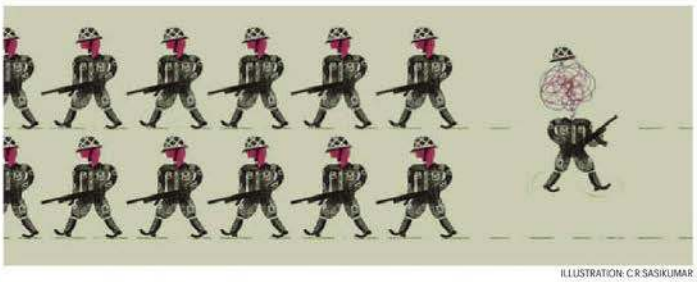


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

AT TWO in the morning, in a rolling sea, a warship's machinery has a defect. On a ridge in Ladakh, a radar goes dark. On a flight line, an aircraft is grounded by a fault that few technicians can trace. The repair depot and manufacturer's support are far away. Someone on the spot must find the fault and put things right.

In the Indian Navy, that person was often a member of a specialised cadre, the artificers. He began with four years of apprenticeship and spent much of the next two decades acquiring the judgement of a Chief Artificer: Knowing how machinery behaved at sea, in rough weather, and not merely how the manual said it should. Agnipath has brought technical entry under the same four-year tenure as everyone else. The old apprenticeship alone lasted as long as an Agniveer's entire engagement.

On November 4, the Union Cabinet approved a second, two-year engagement for the 75 per cent of Agniveers otherwise due to leave after four years. For some 18,000 Agniveers approaching discharge, this is welcome relief, and the government deserves credit. But the decision changes the scheme more fundamentally than the assurance of its continuity suggests.

Agnipath rested on three propositions: Rapid turnover would lower the forces' average age; limiting regular absorption to 25 per cent would restrain pension liabilities; and the remaining 75 per cent would return to civilian life with savings, skills and preferential employment.

The revision unsettles all three. If most Agniveers now serve six years before entering regular service, the intended age profile and pension savings require recalculation.

Civilian reintegration is no clearer. The Chief of Defence Staff suggests that wider opportunities within the forces remove the need for reserved vacancies in the police and paramilitary forces. Yet regular absorption remains conditional. Those rejected after six years will enter the civilian job market two years older, potentially without the employment support originally promised.

Military effectiveness depends on recruits becoming skilled operators, supervisors and eventually the junior leaders on whom units rely. Each step beyond Seaman, Rifleman or Aircraftsman brings greater competence, responsibility and authority. The badges signify a professional progression, not merely seniority.

An Agniveer cannot advance through this structure during the initial engagement. By year six, a batchmate absorbed at four will have spent two years in regular service, with access to professional courses, promotion opportunities and the accompanying pay progression. The Cabinet promises unspecified "seniority benefits" for those serving a second engagement, though the CDS says they will rank below the 25 per cent first chosen. It leaves unclear whether they will enjoy comparable opportunities for training, advancement and remuneration.

Technical trades expose a deeper change. The former Artificer Apprentice entered after Class XII and underwent four years of naval apprenticeship before progressing through an established technical career. The new Agniveer (Apprentice) arrives with a three-year civilian engineering diploma, receives naval training and must subsequently qualify for regular service. The difference lies not simply in educational qualifications, but in how the Navy develops and retains technical competence. A diploma provides the foundations; mastery of a warship's machinery comes through sustained training, experience and responsibility.

There is a legal dimension too. In *Ex Navy Direct Entry Artificers Association v Union of India* (2018), the Supreme Court noted that the four-year apprenticeship of Apprentice Entry Artificers had been counted towards pension eligibility. The judgment does not govern Agnipath, but underscores why the distinction between training, engagement and pensionable service matters. Will an Agniveer's years before regular enrolment count towards qualifying service, or will the pension clock begin only upon absorption?

> Military effectiveness depends on recruits becoming skilled operators, supervisors and eventually the junior leaders on whom units rely. Each step brings greater competence, responsibility and authority

Chris Demchak's *Military Organizations, Complex Machines* explains why technical competence becomes more consequential as equipment grows sophisticated. Complex machines demand specialised knowledge that cannot be readily replaced. The Indian Navy invests years developing such expertise, which civilian and foreign employers readily value. Former artificers have served in Oman's royal yacht fleet and air force.

Agnipath itself recognises the need for exceptions, exempting certain medical technical cadres whose professional skills take years to develop. Avionics, radar maintenance and marine engineering demand comparable rigour. Having served as Class Authority for naval aviation, I wonder how those responsible for technical standards reconcile shortened career pathways with the demands of safety, reliability and operational readiness.

The Cabinet cites an objective assessment but does not show whether Agnipath has delivered the force structure, competence or savings promised. Christopher Paparone's *The Sociology of Military Science* reminds us that military reforms must be examined through evidence and their consequences, not merely their stated intentions.

The assessment belongs before Parliament's Standing Committee on Defence. Retention should reflect the requirements of individual services and trades, with appropriate protection for technical cadres. Six-year selection criteria must be published early. Second-engagement Agniveers need access to professional training and advancement, alongside clarity on how their service counts towards promotion, qualifying service and pension. Seniority alone cannot settle these questions.

Agnipath was conceived as military reform, not simply a recruitment contract. Its revision must, therefore, be judged by what it does to the institution and its capacity to fight the nation's wars.

The armed forces can purchase sophisticated machines. They cannot purchase the years of experience needed to understand them. That competence must be grown, and four years, or even six, is not enough.

The writer is a former Flag Officer Naval Aviation, Indian Navy