

BALANCING SURVEILLANCE

In an increasingly digital and interconnected world, surveillance has become a double-edged sword. On one hand, it serves as a powerful tool for national security, crime prevention, and public safety. On the other, it raises serious concerns about privacy, civil liberties, and the unchecked expansion of state and corporate power. As technology advances, so does the capacity for surveillance-often outpacing the development of legal safeguards and ethical standards.

Governments argue that surveillance is essential to monitor threats, detect criminal activities, and ensure public order. Surveillance technologies such as CCTV networks, facial recognition, GPS tracking, and data mining are now integral to law enforcement and intelligence operations. While such tools have proven effective in tackling terrorism and organized crime, the broader implications of their misuse cannot be ignored.

Mass surveillance, especially without transparent oversight, risks infringing upon individual freedoms. The potential for abuse is real when surveillance is conducted without consent, judicial authorization, or accountability. In democratic societies, this poses a danger to the fundamental rights of citizens, particularly the right to privacy and freedom of expression. Surveillance that targets specific communities, activists, journalists, or political dissenters can erode public trust and stifle democratic participation.

Moreover, the role of private tech companies in surveillance ecosystems has grown significantly. With billions of data points generated daily by users on social media, mobile apps, and digital platforms, corporations now hold unprecedented access to personal information.

The blurred lines between corporate data collection and government surveillance only deepen the challenge of protecting civil liberties.

The solution lies in balance. Surveillance must be rooted in necessity, proportionality, and legality. Robust legal frameworks, transparent oversight mechanisms, and public awareness are essential to ensure surveillance serves its intended purpose without becoming a tool of oppression.

■ ASHWINI VAISHNAW



Peace, progress and prosperity

This transformation has been made possible through record investments in railways, roads, airports, and digital connectivity. Peace accords are bringing stability. People are benefiting from government schemes.

For the first time since independence, the North Eastern region is seen as central to India's development story.

Consider the investments in railways for instance. Railway budget allocation for the region has increased fivefold compared to the 2009-14. This fiscal year alone, ₹10,440 crore has been allocated.

Total budgetary allocation since 2014 to 2025 is ₹62,477 Crore. Today, railway projects worth ₹77,000 crore are underway. Never before has North East witnessed such record levels of investment.

Mizoram's first

Mizoram is part of this growth story. The state is known for its rich culture, love for sports, and beautiful hills. Yet, for decades, it remained distant from the mainstream of connectivity.

Road and air connectivity was limited. Railways had not reached its capital. Aspirations were alive, but the arteries of growth were missing. That is not the case anymore.

The inauguration of the Bairabi-Sairang railway line tomorrow by Hon'ble Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, marks a historic milestone for Mizoram. Built at a cost of over ₹8,000 crore, this 51 kilometre project will connect Aizawl to the national railway network for the first time.

Connecting Mizoram

Along with this, the Prime Minister will also flag off three new train services from Sairang to Delhi (Rajdhani Express), Kolkata (Mizoram express) and Guwahati (Aizawl Interity).

This railway line passes through difficult terrain. Railway engineers have built 143 bridges and 45 tunnels to connect Mizoram. One of the bridges is taller than the Qutub Minar. In fact, in this terrain, like in all other Himalayan lines, the railway line is practically built as a bridge followed by a tunnel followed by a bridge and so on.

Himalayan Tunnelling Method

The North Eastern Himalayas are young mountains, with large sections comprising soft soil and organic material. Constructing tunnels and building bridges in these conditions presented extraordinary challenges. Traditional methods fail because the loose soil can't support the challenges of construction.

To overcome this, our engineers developed a new and ingenious approach, now known as Himalayan Tunnelling Method. In this technique, the soil is first stabilised and then solidified to carry out tunneling and construction.

This enabled us to complete one of the most difficult projects in the region.

Another major challenge was ensuring the stability of bridges at great heights in a region prone to seismic activity. Here too, special designs and advanced techniques were deployed to make the bridges resilient and secure.

This home-grown innovation is a model for similar terrains worldwide. Thousands of engineers, workers, and local communities came together to make this possible.

When India decides to build, it builds smart!!

Benefits to the region

Railways is considered as the engine of growth. It brings new markets closer and creates trade opportunities. For the people of Mizoram, the new railway line will improve the living conditions. With the introduction of Rajdhani Express in Mizoram, the travel time between Aizawl and Delhi region will be reduced by 8 hours. The new Express trains will also make travel between Aizawl, Kolkata, and Guwahati faster and easier. Farmers, especially those engaged in bamboo cultivation and horticulture, will be able to transport their produce faster and at lower cost to wider markets.

The transport of essential commodities, such as food grains

and fertilizers, will be easier. Tourism too will get a boost, as Mizoram's natural beauty becomes more accessible. This will create opportunities for local businesses and youth.

This project will also bring better access to education, healthcare, and employment for the people.

For Mizoram, this connectivity promises all of that and more. From now on, Aizawl will no longer be seen as distant.

Development across the nation

Railways across the country is seeing record transformation. More than 100 Amrit Bharat stations were inaugurated recently, with 1200 more in pipeline. The stations will provide passengers modern facilities and cities new hubs of growth.

More than 150 high-speed Vande Bharat trains are setting new benchmarks in passenger convenience. At the same time, electrification of almost the entire network is making it greener.

Since 2014, 35,000 kilometres of tracks have been laid. This is more than what was achieved in the previous six decades combined. In the last year alone, 3,200 kilometres of new railway lines were added.

This pace of development and transformation is visible in the North East too.

Vision for North East

The Prime Minister said, "For us, EAST means - Empower, Act, Strengthen and Transform." These words capture the essence of his approach to the North East.

Decisive action on multiple fronts has ensured the transformation of the region. Large projects such as the Tata's semi-conductor facility in Assam, hydel power projects like Tato in Arunachal Pradesh, and iconic infrastructure like the Bogibel rail-cum-road bridge are reshaping the region.

Alongside these, the establishment of AIIMS at Guwahati and 10 new greenfield airports have strengthened healthcare and connectivity.

Frontier to Frontrunner

For decades, the people of Mizoram were told to wait for roads, schools, and railways. That wait is now over. These projects are a testament to our Prime Minister's vision towards North East i.e once considered a frontier, now to be hailed as front-runner of India's growth.

(The author is Union Minister for Railways, Electronics & Information Technology, and Information & Broadcasting)

Nepali Gurkha Agniveers: Recruitment under Agnipath Scheme still on Hold: Who Gains/Loses

■ MAJ GEN RANJAN MAHAJAN (RETD)

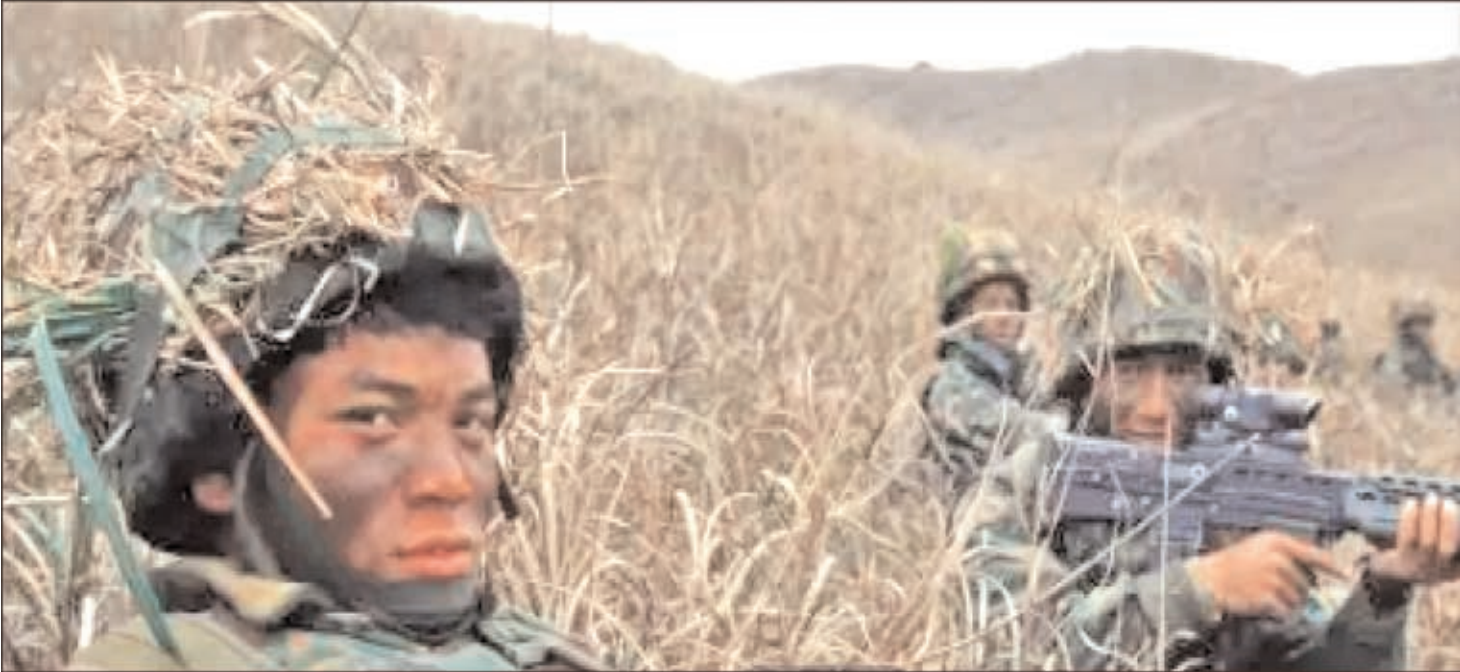
There are a total of seven Gurkha Regiments having 43 Gurkha Infantry Battalions in the Indian Army, with approximately 34,000 Nepali soldiers serving in these units at the time of recruitment freeze in 2020. As per the open source statistics around 14,000 Gurkha soldiers have retired since then. Between 1250 & 1550 Nepalese Gurkhas used to get recruited every year. However, these vacancies have remained unfilled by Nepali Gurkhas but partially filled up through highlander youth from Uttarakhand/Garhwal or even from Jharkhand etc in an attempt to balance out significant short-falls of Gurkhas in operational battalions.

For over two centuries, Nepali Gurkhas have been a solid component of the Indian Army's valiant regiments. Thousands of Nepali Gurkhas have served in India's Armed Forces since the Anglo-Nepal Treaty of 1950. The Gurkha Regiment holds a place of immense importance and reverence within the Indian Army, renowned for its unmatched bravery, unwavering loyalty, and extraordinary combat skills. Originating from the martial communities of Nepal, Gurkha soldiers have been an integral part of the Indian Army since independence, carrying forward a legacy of valor established during British rule. Their motto, "Kayar Hunu Bhandra Marno Ramro" (Better to die than live like a coward), reflects their fierce warrior spirit. Whether in high-altitude warfare, counter-terrorism operations or peacekeeping missions, Gurkhas have consistently demonstrated exemplary courage and professionalism. Their contribution not only strengthens India's military capability but also symbolizes the ties between India and Nepal.

There are very strong ties with historical, cultural, religious, and geographical ones which actually date back centuries. The two nations are linked by open borders, allowing free movement of people and goods and by shared heritage rooted in Hinduism & Buddhism. From ancient times, there have been close socio-economic and familial connections, particularly across border regions. The 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship formalized many of these ties, ensuring mutual cooperation in defense, trade and strategic affairs.

There are many more ex-servicemen of the Indian Army in Nepal than that of the Nepalese Army itself. The Gurkha recruitment traditions have been a cornerstone of Indian soft power in Nepal which has been put on hold for the past four years, initially due to the Chorona Pandemic and later because of a changed recruitment policy. The Agnipath recruitment scheme was launched in India in Jun 2022 - under which a new concept of 4 year contractual military service by young Agniveers was suddenly implemented which actually halted this historic arrangement. As of now, Gurkhas from Nepal are no

longer being recruited into the Indian Army under this new framework due to Nepal's reservations and the scheme's structural incompatibilities with bilateral norms. It is insufficient to simply assert that the Agniveer scheme is uniformly applied to Gurkha and other Indian soldiers and therefore in congruence with 'equal treatment clause' of the Tripartite Agreement between Nepal, India & the UK. Nepali concerns, particularly in light of the rising tide of nationalism and public sensi-



tivity in the country, stem from the perceived unilateral application, and in that sense – imposition, of the scheme by India. As a matter of fact, Agniveers are not entitled to gratuity or pension, and 75 % (as of now) of them will be demobilized after completing their 4 years term, while the remaining soldiers will be retained as regular cadres based on merit & organizational requirements. Before the scheme, a fit General-Duty soldier had to serve a minimum 15/18 years in the army earning his pension & other entitlements including CSD facilities & medical.

The Agnipath scheme's short-term nature and selective retention is perceived as unequal or insecure, contravening the scheme's compliance with the 1947 Tripartite Agreement, which governs the recruitment of Gurkha soldiers. The Himalayan nation also voiced concern over the re-employability of Gurkha soldiers after the expiry of their four-year term which has its own inherent challenges as only 25% of Agniveers to be retained for permanent roles.

While it aims to create a leaner, younger, and more cost-effective Indian Armed Forces, the scheme has run into geopolitical friction, particularly with Nepal who has objected to the Agnipath model for under-mentioned reasons.

Amid rising nationalism and increasing scrutiny of foreign employment, especially in military roles, Nepal's government - particularly under left-leaning coalitions - has been hesitant to endorse what is now a less secure model for its youth. The scheme offers no pension or assured future to a major portion of Agniveers & also raises serious concerns about the welfare of returning soldiers. Despite the inherent goodwill within the Nepal Army towards the continuity of Gurkha recruitment in the Indian Army, given the limitations imposed upon it due to Nepal's current national psyche and political environment, it is unlikely that anything less than a written proposal through official channels would suffice to generate a response. To expect any different, is to misperceive the predicament the Nepali leadership, including that of Nepal Army finds itself in.

The discontinuation of Nepali Gurkha recruitment into the Indian Army under the Agnipath Scheme has created a significant geopolitical and strategic vacuum.

This development carries significant ramifications for both India & Nepal - strategically, economically and diplomatically.

Ramifications for India are likely to affect military-to-military ties which have been a bedrock of India-Nepal relations. Curtailment of Gurkha recruitment may weaken this traditional bond, potentially pushing Nepal closer to China, which has been assertively expanding its influence in the Himalayan region. It is well known fact that the scheme was implemented without much deliberations in the open environment and this resulted in non securing of Nepal's concurrence before implementing. As anticipated it has been viewed as unilateral and somewhere erosion of trust. It complicates diplomatic engagement on broader security cooperation. China is fast spreading its tentacles to grab this opportunity and get Gurkhas into its Armed Forces. Imagine Chinese forces with Gurkha soldiers employed against Indian & Tibet ? The Indian Army is also losing access to one of its most reliable and battle-hardened pools of bravest of brave soldiers.

Ramifications for Nepal are mainly on its economy and unemployment. At a time when job creation in Nepal is limited, cutting off access to Indian Army roles is exacerbating youth dissatisfaction, with long-term socio-political consequences. Even their diminishing presence in India's Armed Forces will slowly reduce Nepal's informal global military footprint. Thousands of Nepali households depend on the remittances & pensions from Gurkha soldiers serving in the Indian Armed Forces are ultimately losing a vital source of income and prestige. The end of recruitment under Agnipath halts a vital income stream and stable career option for many rural Nepali youth.

While both India and Nepal lose out in terms of tradition, trust and capability, some entities and actors do stand to benefit - directly or indirectly. Here's a breakdown of who the beneficiaries might be from this situation.

The UK and Singapore, both of which have historically recruited Gurkhas from Nepal into their armed forces, stand to benefit - albeit indirectly and selectively. The British Army, which recruits around 200-300 Gurkhas per year, now has access to a larger, more competitive talent pool, allowing them to pick the best. The British Army

has now raised a new King's Artillery Regiments of Gurkhas. 400 Gurkhas will be joining the Regiment over the next 4 years. King Charles has approved the new regimental badge with Khukhries conveying a big message. Singapore employs Gurkhas in its elite Gurkha Contingent, a special police unit under the Ministry of Home Affairs. With more Gurkhas now seeking foreign employment, Singapore can recruit top-tier candidates, improving quality and readiness of the Gurkha Contingent.

However neither the UK nor Singapore can absorb large numbers of Gurkhas - both have limited, elite intake processes. Continuity in Singapore & UK Army is also to be critically analyzed at this point of time. Till when, will the recruitment be kept in the regular loops? What next, if these two nations also slowly start reducing the trend? strikes and back door diplomacy should not be the Government's agenda to push its youths for recruitment in other militaries but find a viable solution in its own land. The overall economic vacuum left by India's exit can't be filled by the UK and Singapore alone & therefore China is the primary geopolitical beneficiary.

China, having closely watched the India-Nepal Gurkha recruitment issue, is all out to seize the opportunity to woo Nepal further into its strategic orbit, offering security cooperation or economic incentives. A weakened India-Nepal military bond indirectly aids China's regional ambitions, especially in the context of border sensitivities in the Himalayan belt. China-backed organizations operating in Nepal are gaining greater access and influence in rural areas - especially those previously dependent on Indian Army income.

A more nuanced, consultative approach, indicating the acknowledgment that the recruitment of a sovereign country's citizens into the Indian Army may warrant a less carte blanche approach, could go a long way towards assuaging Nepali concerns. Given that the country is still reeling from the aftermath of the Maoist conflict, and the fact that the most hardcore Maoist splinter group, the so called 'Biplap Faction' is still militarily organized and yet to disarm, there is also a genuine Nepali security concern of the en masse dumping of youth, militarily better trained than the Nepal Army, back into the as-yet volatile Nepali society.

After speaking with stakeholders and concerned individuals, it is evident that if this situation is not addressed promptly, our principal strategic rival, China, may exploit the opportunity to extend its influence by recruiting Gurkha warriors into its own military forces.

Reports suggest that China is already considering enlisting Gurkhas for deployment in sensitive regions such as Tibet - a scenario that would be deeply concerning. An assessment of the local Gurkha population and Nepalese youth reveals a generally positive outlook toward the Agnipath scheme, recognizing it as a valuable avenue for employment and future opportunities after completing their tenure as Agniveers. This presents a clear win-win scenario. However, what is urgently needed now is a firm and proactive approach, backed by decisive action, to resolve this matter once and for all.

For India, given the pervasive threats over the horizon, keeping the doors open for a surge of recruitment from the proven Gorkha human pool of Nepal is equally important. The British employed as many as 14 Gurkha battalions during the Malayan Emergency.

Numbers dwindled to a low of two Battalions in the past decades, but keeping the door open has allowed the British to surge numbers when required, as seen during the more recent Afghanistan deployments. There are currently some five Bns active, and the British have most recently formed the first King's Gurkha Artillery Bn! This strategy is much more advantageous than closing the door entirely, based mainly on differences over approaches, technicalities and perceived lack of deference, one way or another.

Restoring mutual trust will require both nations to revisit and renegotiate the terms of military cooperation, possibly carving out a special exemption or tailored pathway for Nepali Gurkhas. In the absence of such efforts, the rift may widen, to the detriment of both nations' shared history and regional security. As a matter of fact the initiative is being taken as I quote - "The Indian Army Chief told The Telegraph, "I have personally requested the

Nepal Army chief to revive the recruitment of the ethnic Gurkha community in the Indian Army. I am very hopeful that it will resume sooner than later' Unquote". For both Nepal and India, cessation of Gorkha recruitment would mean that, in time, both sides stand to lose a remarkable constituency of goodwill in each other's societies and armed forces, currently prevalent even up to the decision making echelons. We need to act fast, positive, constructive & decisive. The Government of Nepal should engage India diplomatically through bilateral dialogue seeking special consideration for Nepalese Agniveers (longer tenure or pension). And India should approach Nepal formally, in writing. Start a formal dialogue and a genuine quest for compromise with a balanced way ahead. India must preferably offer an increased quota for Gorkhas within the Agniveer scheme, satisfying most Nepali concerns and allowing the Government of Nepal to satisfy domestic audiences. India also needs to cater for alternative follow-on employment for a larger chunk of discontinued Gorkhas in paramilitary and other institutions, thereby addressing the Nepali concerns about military trained unemployed youth flooding back into the country.

