

Special to Express | Tour of Duty: Don't blunt our winning edge

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As part of the ongoing military reforms, the government is introducing '**Tour of Duty' (ToD) scheme called Agnipath**, which is a short-term recruitment plan. Under the new policy, males aged 18-21 years with 10+2 qualification, will be enrolled on contractual basis for a period of four years, including six months of training. On completion of the tenure, 75 percent will stand released and the remaining will be re-enrolled for a period of 15 years on fresh terms of service, which will entitle them to pension and post-retirement benefits. Those relieved as 'Agni Veers' will be given a severance package called 'Seva Nidhi', an amount of Rs 10 lakh — an individual contributing 30 per cent of monthly emoluments and government supplementing with an equal amount.

Every year, around 60,000 defence personnel retire from the service. The ToD recruitment scheme was conceived in 2020 under the aegis of 'Department of Military Affairs' headed by then CDS General Bipin Rawat. The underlying rationale for this proposition was to reduce the mounting defence pension bill, estimated to be over third (including MOD civilians) of the defence budget. Given the crucial imperatives, the ToD proposal suffers from serious pitfalls as it overlooks critical ground realities.

Veterans are the face of armed forces in a society. To quote US first President George Washington; "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars treated and appreciated by their nation". An 'Agniveer' left to fend for self after four years of service may not be an ideal role model for the youth of the nation.

General George S Patton had famously said: "Wars are fought with weapons but won by the men. It is the spirit of men who follow and the man who leads that gain victory". The India Army has fought all the war against adversaries who were better armed, yet won because of the soldier behind the weapon. The situation is unlikely to change in the near future; in fact the gap is likely to widen vis-à-vis China. So let's be wary of not blunting our winning edge!

(The writer is a war veteran who commanded a battalion in Siachen-Chushul, formations in the Valley and North East; he is currently Professor, Strategic-IR and Management Studies)