

# Tour of Duty model could add to majoritarian violence and affect army efficiency

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During Partition in 1947, a curious pattern emerged in the districts with larger concentrations of combat veterans from the Second World War. In these districts veterans were heavily involved in campaigns to persuade members of the other religious communities to leave, in organising the mass flight of their own community in areas where they were outnumbered, and in encouraging co-religionists to move into a district where their dominant position seemed tenuous. The most violent ethnic cleansing occurred when members of the majority community had gained combat experience as soldiers and the minority community was unorganised. An additional month of combat experience was associated with 1.1 percentage greater reduction in the minority population due to killing, conversion or migration—equivalent to 17,000 people per district. These were the findings of a research paper titled *Does Combat experience foster Organizational Skill? Evidence from Ethnic Cleansing during the Partition of India* by Steven Wilkinson and Saumitra Jha, published in 2012. They clarified that this does not automatically mean that all veterans were involved in such violence. Regardless, the research does point to worrying implications for the government's newly proposed plan for the Tour of Duty system in army recruitment.



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Columns**

The TOD system proposes short-term contracts for three to five years. The organising principles of the Indian Army are steeped in its colonial tradition, and its operating ethos has not changed since the Second World War. The details of the TOD proposal have not been officially released so far, though the idea first appeared in media reports in May 2020. The late chief of defence staff general Bipin Rawat told journalists that the concept was at a nascent stage and under the army chief's consideration. He sounded sceptical about the proposal, arguing that its viability needed to be studied. "It will require a year of training," Rawat had said. "The tour of duty will be in Kashmir and the northeast... One year of training cost... equipping him and doing everything for him and then losing him after four years. Is it going to balance out?"

A retired defence ministry official told me that the proposal had emanated from neither the defence services nor the defence ministry. He said that these "brainwaves" emerge "from somewhere else, from a group of two or three people," which are then to be implemented by the service headquarters. A former service chief told me that the services were not enthusiastic about the proposal, with the army particularly opposed to it. Rawat was not enamoured by the idea either, but the official said, "he had become the harbinger of bad news from the government" for the defence services by then. A compromise of

recruiting only 5,000 soldiers through the TOD model—out of the 50,000 to 80,000 soldiers recruited every year—was proposed by the services but rejected by the authorities.

The insistence of the authorities and the reluctance of the services created a stalemate, which resulted in complete stalling of recruitment in the financial years between 2020 and 2022. The excuse proffered by the government was restrictions imposed on public gatherings due to the pandemic. However, election rallies and religious gatherings seemed unaffected by this. By January 2022, the army was short of over eighty thousand soldiers from its authorised strength of 1,212,000. It is believed to have crossed 100,000 now. These shortages seemed to have weakened the army's resolve and, barring ongoing negotiations over specifics, it has conceded to the TOD proposal.

A three-star general serving in the army headquarters told me that the government's argument was financial. More than half the budgetary allocation for the defence ministry of Rs 5.25 lakh crore goes towards pensions and salaries, leaving little for defence modernisation. Having promised and implemented the One Rank One Pension scheme, the political imperatives of the Modi government do not allow for any major reform in defence pensions. In its 2020 report, the fifteenth finance commission was forced to recommend that the government “should take immediate measures to innovatively bring down the salaries and pension liabilities” of defence personnel due to “overall fiscal constraints.” But the recommendations of the commission, including “bringing service personnel currently under the old pension scheme into the New Pension Scheme or a separate NPS for the armed forces” have not found any political traction.

By introducing the TOD scheme, the government has instead chosen to slash the budget for defence pensions and salaries by stealth. After independence, soldiers were enlisted for seven years, with eight years in the reserves. During the Emergency, the enlistment was increased to 17 years. As they became pensionable after 15 years of service, this allowed most soldiers to earn a pension and lead a comfortable retired life of dignity. “Even as money may not make up for physical deprivations,” a retired officer and defence analyst argues in an article, “the pride and support associated with a pension is undoubtedly an important psychological imperative to enhance functional efficiency and performance under the most trying operational conditions.”

There are other functional issues. The existing organisation is based on roles and responsibilities that are given after specific training, skills, and experience. The structure has emerged based on unique operational requirements of the Indian armed forces and the induction of weapons and technology over decades. If soldiers are recruited for only three or five years, the functional norms of the military will have to be rewritten—the consequences of which have not been studied.

Basic recruit training is for one year, and letting a trained soldier go after two years in the field is a waste of a precious resource. Shorter tenures will entail a rapid turnover of soldiers, which would need a bigger recruit training infrastructure for additional men.

This will imply higher costs but is also bound to affect the quality of recruit training. The government may save a few rupees, but it risks a poorly motivated and badly trained cadre of young men to defend our borders.

The most radical change in the proposal, however, is to have recruitment on an all-India basis. Till now, the army aspired to recruit soldiers based on the concept of Recruitable Male Population of each state, wherein soldiers are allocated to various units and sub-units based on class, which is a euphemism for sub-caste. This segregation is a practice retained from the colonial era, despite a formal discarding of the martial races theory. It has been vehemently argued for by the army in the Supreme Court.

This idea of a group of men fighting for “*naam, namak aur nishan*”—loosely translated as honour, loyalty and identity—is a distinctive feature of the Indian Army. The three-star general told me that it is hard to explain how this intangible factor works in real life in the army, unless one has served in dangerous operations with these men. Most modern militaries have professional soldiers and they do not need the anchors of caste, language, or village to fight together. There is no reason that Indians cannot do the same, but it would need a new ethos, organising dictum and operating philosophy for the Indian Army—none of which has been proposed or initiated so far. The least such a far-reaching move needs is adequate planning—to begin with, a white paper by the government, a detailed report by the parliamentary standing committee on defence, a robust parliamentary discussion, and a vigorous public debate. To undertake such a major exercise furtively is irresponsible and reckless.

In 1947, when communities in India lacked protection and their future was highly uncertain, the incentives for organising violence and collective action were a lot different from they were in post-Vietnam America, where the state was stable and the economy growing. As per RBI’s data, a vast section of Indians see their economic future as highly uncertain while sustained high unemployment rates under the Modi government have led to a situation where a record number of young people have stopped looking for jobs.

Wilkinson and Jha’s argument is supported by other research which shows that ethnic cleansing in places such as Yugoslavia and Rwanda depends on the availability and skills of specialists in violence, particularly in environments where the state’s coercive power had been weakened. These findings hold an important lesson for today’s India, where the government has ceded the state’s monopoly over violence to Hindutva mobs, abetted by the institutional infirmity of the judiciary, police, bureaucracy and the media.

Going by the current numbers, up to 50,000 young men in their early twenties, trained in inflicting organised violence and, with combat experience, could be demobilised every year. In the Hindutva-led hatred milieu of today, where religious minorities are being targeted with impunity, what could go wrong? Without the required planning, the only effect of the TOD model we are likely to witness is a letting loose of hordes of young men trained to inflict violence into the Hindutva cauldron. India could end up paying an exorbitant price for the government’s yearning to pinch a few rupees.

