**Agnipath it is**

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It was Abraham Lincoln who once tried to clarify one of the basic elements of human nature in relation to one’s desire to manipulate others. ‘You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.’ India has consistently been proving this well-known saying wrong. Conversely, the world also seems to have been willfully overlooking the BJP-led government’s various successful attempts of fooling all of the people all of the time. As such, the world is in no mood to stop India from treading the pathway of fire. From annexing an internationally recognised disputed territory to its violation of human rights, subduing minorities, sponsoring terrorism, firing accidental cruise missiles and Arundhati Roy’s claims, India has been fooling around for quite some time now. One wonders if the resolution recently introduced by Congresswoman Ilhan Omar on designating India as a ‘country of particular concern’ ever sees the light of day.

This time, India is trying to fool its own people.

Introduced on June 14, the ‘Agnipath’ Scheme is meant to annually recruit around forty-six thousand youngsters between seventeen-and-a-half to twenty-three-year old’s as soldiers below the rank of commissioned officers into all three services of the armed forces. Scheduled to be implemented in September, the Agnipath Scheme is expected to produce ‘Agniveers’, the ‘Fire Warriors’, a new rank introduced by New Delhi. The title of the scheme itself speaks volumes about the Indian mindset under PM Modi’s leadership. Agnipath means the ‘Pathway of Fire’.

Bulldozing the old system of recruitment involving long tenures, life-long pension benefits, medical allowance and other benefits, the Agnipath aims at compensating the aspiring soldiers for a three-year hiatus in effecting fresh recruitments. As around fifty to sixty thousand soldiers retire annually, affecting the operational capabilities of the Indian armed forces, the Government needed to address the ensuing manpower shortfall of around 165,000 personnel. Covid-19 is being attributed to this unprecedented oversight, a logic the thousands of protesters have refused to buy. Having less than one percent representation in the armed forces, Indian Muslims are already at a disadvantageous position. With the advent of this scheme, their share will further reduce drastically, deepening the sense of discrimination in the world’s largest democracy even more.

In their four-year fixed tenure, Agniveers will receive proper training followed by appropriate deployment. Drawing a little higher salary than the routine soldiers, an Agniveer will get a bonus of $15,000 at the end of the prescribed tenure. Out of the forty-six-thousand new recruits, only twenty-five percent will be kept while the remaining seventy-five percent will be asked to go home. Technically speaking, it is purely India’s internal matter and no other country including Pakistan may have any objection to the introduction of this scheme unless of course tomorrow New Delhi claims it to be an Islamabad-sponsored move, exported to India via the Wagah border.

The scheme seems to have three basic objectives in economic, political and strategic realms. Economic, because the ever-increasing burden of pension and salaries amounts on the defence budget could be stalled as the Agniveers are not entitled to gratuity or any pension benefits. Exclusion of routine expenditure on the death of soldiers or medical allowances for them and their families will lessen the burden even more. Political, because initiating the Scheme will provide answers to the disturbing questions about the stalled process of recruitment since 2019. Strategic, because the huge savings so accrued could be utilised to technologically modernise the armed forces.

Getting rid of seventy-five percent of freshly recruited soldiers at the end of the four-year term without assigning any reason to that effect raises a number of questions. And some eyebrows too. Imagine, every four-years, around 34,500 militarily trained soldiers between the age of twenty-two and twenty-seven would be roaming about the streets of India looking for a job. Do you think they will lead their lives peacefully as responsible citizens once their bonus amount is spent? In a seemingly divided society, these angry but trained soldiers are not likely to sit quietly. Handling a weapon might come in handy to making both the ends meet. Clearly, the Agnipath Scheme is likely to have far reaching effects on the overall regional security situation as well. There seems to be a method in the madness.

Should the aspiring youth of India be worried? They already are. In a matter of days, the temporary and discriminatory nature of the Scheme has resulted in widespread demand of discussing the subject in Parliament besides inundating Indian courts with prayers to nullify it. The first two days of the announcement of the Scheme witnessed the burning of twelve trains while disturbing the movement of another three-hundred. On the other hand, supported by the three Services Chiefs, the Modi government has chosen to ignore the violent outrage just as it did with the 2020-21 Farmers Movement.

Should Pakistan be concerned? The Pathway of Fire is not likely to take the Agniveers to Congo for complementing the UN peacekeeping efforts. Neither would this Pathway goes through any of the SAARC countries except Pakistan. Given the history of Indian hegemonistic designs against its western neighbour, the scheme might already have set certain alarms in Islamabad. However, it is too early to cross the bridge. Let the scheme be implemented in September and we will talk about its security ramifications for Pakistan. As the Farmers Movement brought New Delhi to its knees, there is every possibility of history repeating itself. Secondly, looking at the initial violent reaction of the Hindu youth, one would not be surprised if PM Modi withdrew this novel scheme altogether or agreed to take all the Agniveers as permanent members of the armed forces, putting the youth’s apprehensions to rest. In any case, India may soon realise that playing with fire was not a good idea after all.

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