

Role of Cantonments in Urbanization of India: Mughals to Smart Cities

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Abstract

While the Mughals were largely city based rulers and gave further impetus to urbanization in Indian sub-continent, their armies were mostly located in fort-towns in jagirs and subahs and at frontier areas considered to be strategically important like Mardan in Khyber Pakhtunwa, Lahore, Multan etc.

The establishment of Cantonments started during British period with the need for quartering the troops. Housing was the core objective. The first Cantonment was established in Barrackpore (35 km from Kolkata) in 1765 and the second at Danapore (Patna) in the same year.

“At the heart of each of the first British cities in India – Madras (1644), Bombay (1661) and Calcutta (1690), cities which the British largely created themselves from the ground up – was a fort area dominated, designed, and occupied by the British. They lived mostly inside the fort area, and in the strongly fortified and controlled area around it, sometimes called the “civil lines”. Here they built their homes, shops, and churches as well as their commercial and administrative headquarters. Their armed forces were accommodated nearby in an area called the “cantonment” or “camp”. The much larger Indian area that sprang up around the British core was usually referred to as the “native” or “black town”.

As British control extended across India in the 18th and 19th centuries, and encompassed many already existing cities, these patterns of spatial separation by nationality and race were repeated. In some cities, where British presence was extensive, very large areas of cantonment and civil lines were established alongside pre-existing Indian cities. New Delhi, Bangalore, and Secunderabad (adjoining Hyderabad) are examples. According to Prof. Howard Spodek of Temple University, “in the capitals of India’s large princely states, regions that the British left for local rulers to administer, and in the center of regions with numerous smaller princely states, the British built ‘residency’ areas to headquarter their local administration and to garrison their troops adjacent to the existing native cities”.

These cantonments were spread / located throughout India and later on connected with railways to help quick mobilization of forces. Some cantonments were situated in hill areas to cater to British officer’s tastes and some were developed to cater for the needs of two great wars like Mhow (M.P.), Dehra Dun etc. However whatsoever may had been the reason for developing such large number of cantonments, these soldier camps slowly grew into large towns (Secundrabad) and hill stations (Lansdowne) contributing to the development of urbanization in Indian sub-continent on modern lines. Large open amphitheatres, spacious bungalows, balling halls, lush green gardens and well laid out streets were some of the major features of these new urban centers (which, however, were based on concept of racial segregation and other unjust colonial policies towards Indians).

After independence, massive rise in population and migration created problems not only for cities but also for cantonment towns. Lack of maintenance and awareness among public along with mismanagement and illegal encroachment have led to deterioration of cantonment infrastructure. Newly launched Smart Cities Program by Govt. of India hopes to solve some of these problems and give a rejuvenated look to British era towns and associated infrastructure. We as Indians must preserve and cherish these urban landscapes (cantonments) as they are Indian heritage (made out of our resources and blood, sweat & tears of thousands of our men have made these constructions possible). These beautiful structures lend a new dimension to urbanity in India.

Presently there are 62 Cantonments in the country located in 19 states and fall under the jurisdiction of 5 Army Commands. The total area covered by the Cantonments is 1,86,730 Acres and the population as per 2011 Census is 20, 91, 734.

This paper attempts to focus on some of the aspects of comparative role of cantonments in urbanization of Indian landscapes since Mughal period to present Smart Cities Program.

Key Words: urbanization, cantonment, smart city, residency, heritage.

Introduction

Many watershed moments of Indian history owe their origins to the cantonments and have been shaped by people inhabiting them whether soldiers or civilians. Chankya, a resident of forward area (Taxila) of Nanda Empire warned Mahananda about a possible invasion by Alexander into the Ganga-Yamuna doab and later on laid the foundations for Mauryan Empire. Delhi sultans and Mughals kept their forces in battle ready mode at various posts and towns in North-West Frontier region to check Mongol attacks in mainland Hindustan. Some of these posts like Mardaan in modern Pakistan and many others were developed into modern cantonments by British to secure western borders of the Raj against a possible invasion by Russians. Revolt / Mutiny of 1857 considered as first war of independence by some / many scholars also rose from military garrison of Bengal.

In modern India, the final nail in the coffin of British Raj was struck by revolt of naval and air force ratings of Bombay and Karachi cantonments in 1946. Further the Indian army units at Jabalpur too rose in rebellion

creating doubts in minds of colonizers about the loyalty of Indian armed forces leading to a quick withdrawal of Britain from Indian subcontinent in 1947. After independence in 1947-48 the Pakistani regular and irregular troops attacked princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. The Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir signed instrument of accession with Indian government thereby making Jammu and Kashmir a state of free India.

Prior to this historic moment, the chain of events at a military cantonment of Skardu (today in Pakistan occupied Kashmir) opposite Kargil town transformed Maharaja's neutrality into alignment with India. In the month of October 1947 Maharaja's Hindu Dogra troops numbering around 35 were beheaded by fellow Muslim soldiers while they were asleep. The rebellious Muslim soldiers joined invading Pakistani forces giving the events a communal colour and forcing the Maharaja to ask for India's help. Arrival of Indian army at Srinagar air force station again changed the course of history by saving life, property and honour of lakhs of innocent people in those restive years.

In the historical year of 1971, India-Pakistan war further enumerated the importance of cantonments in national life when Pakistani air force attack on Srinagar air force station formally / officially trumpeted the war begun / drums leading to a crushing defeat of Pakistan and creation of modern nation-state of Bangladesh. Such important role have also been played by cantonments in second world war when Mhow was an important administrative and training centre for allied forces giving international significance to cantonments of subcontinent.

Mughal Period

Hence, we can see the way cantonments have been part and parcel of the history of sub-continent from ancient period to present. Sufficiently ensuring ourselves of the importance of these towns we can now shift our focus on the role they have played in urbanization of India from Mughal period to present smart cities programme. Urbanization as a definition “includes population which is urban in nature having all the necessary infrastructure and facilities needed to involve in activities other than agricultural production (secondary and tertiary activities).

During Mughal period, cantonments were housed in fort-towns throughout the jagirs. Soldiers and other professionals used to live there along with families and also without families in cases like in forward areas or in battle camps. As Mughals also had a competent navy, naval garrisons were also present along the coast lines in Deccan and Gujarat. Contemporaries of Mughals like Rajputs had an extensive network of fort-towns in northern and western India. Later on Jats, Marathas and Deccani sultans also constructed fort-towns to ensure their territorial integrity while promoting urbanization in various respects. These fort-

towns were generally located on important routes both strategic and trade-mercantile like Ranthambhor and Mandu, as shortest route connecting Gujarat coast with Delhi and as a passage to Deccan expeditions. Hence they became important centres of trade, banking, craftsmanship, art and architecture. People from all walks of life used to visit for various works and also to settle permanently to pursue non-agricultural professions. Sprawling bazaars as explained by many foreign travellers used to be a common sight in these towns. Soldier class along with aristocracy used to be a major customer for the products ranging from cloth to money exchange (hundis).

Architecture wise fort-towns of Agra, Gwalior, Kumbhalgarh, Ranthambhor, Mehrangarh, Allahabad, Amer, Aurangabad, Multan etc were among the best anywhere in the world. Ponds, lakes, gardens, temples, mosques, bazaars, palaces, guest houses, leisure palaces, storage houses, kitchens, tunnels etc along with effective law and order machinery imparting a sense of security in its residents made these towns unique during medieval period. Subsequently, these fort-towns became harbinger of urbanization in medieval India making it famous for its riches throughout the world.

Various other contemporaries of Mughals particularly Marathas, Jats and Afghans too developed fort-towns and garrisons which were important both in terms of extending territorial rights and as symbols of sovereignty. Fort-towns of Pune, Solapur, Nashik etc grew into large urban centres attracting businesses and trade on a large scale. Even after decline of Mughal empire fort-towns continued to hold prominent place in scheme of urbanization under nizam and nawabs. City of Secundrabad was originally developed as a garrison town under nizamat and was further developed as

a permanent cantonment by British. Today the city is as large as Hyderabad itself.

Modern Period

Architecturally the bungalow system which dots the skyline of almost all British era military cantonments in Indian subcontinent owes its origin to Mughal architecture style of pre-fabricated wooden 'bangla' system. British improvised it to suit their needs and constructed these beautiful buildings throughout their cantonments and civil lines along with gardens and modern paved street system giving it a urban look.

Typically, modern military cantonments in India owe their origins to British, French, Dutch and Portuguese colonial conquests in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although the word cantonment is of French origin when Napoleon started basing his troops on a permanent basis at various locations thus replacing the age old bivouac system prevalent in Europe¹. However in India, British selected location, size and infrastructure in almost all the military cantonments existing today. The first cantonment was established in Barrackpore (35 kms from Kolkata) in 1765 and second at Danapore (Patna)². Hence we see colonial elements subdued in these towns whether in form of military need or leisure purpose. Some of the cantonments were developed in already existing fort-towns while many new military camps were developed near the civil lines which housed civilian British population. Almost all the major cities had new infrastructure in form of military camp and civil lines like Meerut, Delhi, Jalandhar, Lahore, Kanpur, Allahabad, Jhansi, Lucknow, Ajmer, Pune, Bengaluru etc. The military camp which later got converted into a cantonment was located generally at a deserted place outside main city. It was done to keep soldiers away from local civilians and also considering the need for troop

movement and space for new infrastructure which was less in main city. These cantonment towns were self sufficient and were pivotal to British urbanization drive in the subcontinent. Today our cities have grown so much that cantonments have become part of main city in almost all urban areas like Delhi, Jalandhar, Meerut etc.

Some semi permanent and permanent camps were developed in frontier areas to secure boundaries of the empire from other European powers and for force projection & strategic depth. Examples are Peshawar, Mardaan, Quetta and Rawalpindi. Some military cantonments were established to promote 'sons of the soil' policy like Lansdowne, Dehra Dun, Nainital etc. Some others were developed during the two great wars as training facility and logistics centre like Mhow, Babina, Jabalpur, Gopalpur etc.

We can now take up few cantonments and study their history, location and how the urban infrastructure developed in them came about.

Jalandhar cantonment was developed by British in 1940s after the first Anglo-Sikh war. Originally located outside the city, it was ideally situated on Grand Trunk road and on the tri junction of Beas, Sutlej and Ravi rivers. Connected by railway line both to the city as well as rest of the country, Jalandhar cantonment had airfield too which has now been converted into a class-I airport. Presently it is one of the biggest cantonments in the country having a large civilian population and houses a army corps headquarter. It has great sports infrastructure specially for hockey and is self sufficient with colleges, schools and general hospital³.

Belgaum cantonment in Karnataka is located amidst Sahyadri range of Western Ghats. Surrounded from lush green mountains on all sides, the weather is moderate and ideal for training and leisure

purposes. Also from British standpoint, who developed it in early nineteenth century, it was ideal place to have control over Konkan coast and check over princely states of south India. Today Belgaum as a city is known for its cantonment throughout India and has urban infrastructure comparable to any modern city⁴.

Military cantonments in Madhya Pradesh specially Mhow and Panchmarhi were extensively developed during second world war to train Indian Army. It was pivotal to second world war as skills learned in central Indian jungles enabled Indian Army to successfully repel Japanese advances in Indo-Burma and other regions in south east Asia. Mhow was also a major co-ordinating centre as well in the second great war in south and south east Asia for the allies. Today Mhow is a major town in Madhya Pradesh while Panchmarhi is a world famous hill station⁵.

Hill stations of Dehra Dun, Lansdowne and Ranikhet were developed and promoted by British both for leisure purposes and also for promoting 'sons of the soil' policy as well as 'martial race' theory. These towns are now important urban centres and popular hill station having all the necessary urban facilities.

Post-Independence and Smart Cities

In independent India, cantonment is a place or places declared by the central government by notification in official gazette, in which any part of the forces is quartered or which, being in vicinity of such place or places, is or are required for the services of such forces. At present there are 62 cantonments in the country located in 19 states and falling under 5 army commands while having combined area of 186730 acres. If we add other military garrisons, semi permanent and

rented facilities this area extends up to 200000 acres. However the population of cantonments is 20,91,734 . Hence the density of population is quite low when compared to Indian cities⁶.

Smart cities programme launched by the incumbent government hopes to solve urbanization woes of rapidly modernising India. Cantonments have also been roped in to join the league of future smart cities. Pune cantonment spread over an area of almost 3000 acres is undergoing major changes to achieve smart cantonment tag⁷. A complete remodelling of cantonment, pan cantonment optical fibre network, electricity through solar energy in schools and hospital etc are the steps taken by the cantonment board towards modernization of infrastructure. Special focus up on environment will be given to create a harmonious atmosphere for the residents. Flower shows, gardening, nursery for residents and 'adopt a tree' programme have been organized to inculcate importance of trees among its residents. A push towards renewable energy is also made by cantonment authorities to achieve self sufficiency in power generation as well as lessening its carbon footprint.

However, many problems still continue which hinder the growth of cantonments as smart cantonments. Illegal encroachments, lack of maintenance, paucity of funds and manpower, archaic property laws, lack of facilities to civilians living in cantonments and corruption remain major challenges in front of planners. Previous governments tried to bring changes as evident from a new cantonment policy brought in 2006 but still major provisions of defence act, 1903, when Lord Kitchener redistributed Indian army, are intact and legally enforceable. Present government will have to take a relook at these issues hampering the modernization of cantonments in India and must assimilate best of past and present while planning for

future to solve urbanization woes of India in general and cantonments in particular.

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