

# Cantonments: Colonial Relics or Military Necessities

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The concept of a cantonment arose from the dual need of quartering and providing allied services to the armed forces when the British ruled India. The location of any military unit in an undeveloped area had to be supported by a variety of services such as tailors, barbers, tradesmen and shop-keepers. Gradually, a small bazar grew up adjacent to the garrison with consequent development of certain civic amenities such as parks, gardens, hospitals, burial grounds and schools. A cantonment, therefore, had two identities: the military area where the troops were quartered and the civil area which provided the allied services. Under Lord Kitchener's reorganisation plan (1903), 19 cantonments were established. Subsequently, various additional cantonments were built by the British.

Cantonments were originally located well apart from the main civil population, local villages and towns. However, with the passage of time and the rapid increase in population, the older cantonments have invariably merged with the expanding adjoining municipal areas. While the military areas still remain an open and orderly layout, albeit, somewhat dilapidated in many cases, the civil area of a cantonment is in no way different to its adjacent municipal zone, either ethnically, culturally or commercially and is even regulated by civilian agencies such as traffic police, despite being under the cantonment's administration.

## THE CANTONMENT ACT

Cantonments are categorised and organised according to the population; the existing constitution for cantonments is limited by the Act to Class I, Class II and Class III cantonments. The largest, where the civil population exceeds 10,000 is termed as a Class I Cantonment. Cantonments are governed by special rules which were formalised in the Cantonment Act (1924). This was last amended in 1983, and provides for the constitution of cantonment boards, and an organisation to cater for the various functions of general administration, revenue, engineering, sanitation, public health and so on. A Class I Cantonment has a total staff of about 850 civilians who function under a Cantonment Executive Officer (CEO), a civilian from the department of the Defence Estates Organisation, Ministry of Defence. However, this organisation was never meant to cater for a civil population approaching one lakh, with all the attendant problems which a modern city faces today.

A cantonment board consists of elected civilians and nominated military officers. This functions under the local military Station Commander who in addition to his main military duties which are quite considerable, also has the subsidiary duty of ex-officio President of the Cantonment Board. The President has two roles related to the cantonment: to preside over the deliberations of the Board and to administer the military and civil areas. Administering the military area is tedious but has not proved difficult due to the inherent discipline and clear-cut chain of command in our military organisation. But control of the civil area through the cantonment board is extremely diluted and unsatisfactory. This is particularly true of large cantonments where the population of the civil area is about 10 times the figure originally conceived as a Class I Cantonment.

#### POPULATION DENSITIES

An examination of Pune Cantonment's composition and organisation is of interest as this is a typical cantonment which has grown too big to be properly managed. 50 years ago, the Cantonment formed the periphery of Pune (Poona). Today, it is surrounded on all sides by the city. Only military units and the families of serving soldiers are located in the military zone, together with about 200 civilian families residing in bungalows allotted to them by the British through special grants. In Pune, the military zone consists of 93 per cent of the land; the civil area with a population of one lakh has only seven per cent of the land. The military zone is generally clean and open, though many of the bungalows have a dilapidated look. This is because the rules and regulations governing reconstruction and repairs to "old grants" bungalows have inhibited their repair and upkeep. This problem is receiving separate attention by the Defence Ministry. Despite the run-down appearance of some parts of the military area, the quality of life therein is better than that prevailing in the civil area, which consists of 78 per cent of the total Cantonment's population; the military zone has 22 per cent.

Though the congested civil area may be judged by some as satisfactory when compared to its neighbouring municipal area, it will have to be admitted that this has to face many problems which are heightened due to an ineffective and out-dated organisation in which channels of command and responsibility no longer work satisfactorily. The President of Pune Cantonment Board is also the Station Commander Pune, and Commander Pune Sub Area. His main responsibility is to administer the 44 military establishments and units located in Pune Sub Area which covers the whole of Maharashtra less Bombay and a few districts. But because Pune Cantonment Board and its affairs attract attention in the local press, he is forced to devote extra time to the Cantonment at the expense of his primary task. Moreover, the organisation of Pune Cantonment is not designed to cater for a civil population of one lakh, nor is he trained to deal

with problems facing a modern city. The average CEO is an experienced administrator, but he is not supported by adequate professional advice. The organisation lacks town planners, architects, civil engineers, sanitation experts and legal advisers. The law and order situation is satisfactory but threatens to pose problems in the near future due to the rise in unemployment and the traffic in drugs.

#### CURRENT PROBLEMS

Due to indifferent controls, builders took advantage of liberal laws in Pune Cantonment and a spate of high-rise buildings mushroomed in the civil area between 1979 and 1982. This has resulted in the growth of influential commercial groups and a powerful builder's lobby which exercises considerable financial pressure on Board members and Cantonment staff, specially when building activities worth crores of rupees are at stake. In December 1982, strict restrictions were imposed by the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Southern Command. This curbed building plans, but has resulted in a series of court cases. The Board is today contesting some 46 High Court and three Supreme Court cases. Moreover, some builders are going ahead with questionable constructions. This gives rise to adverse public comments by enraged citizens and environmentalists, and results in fresh legal tangles.

There are other inherent managerial weaknesses in the present organisation. The Police looks after the traffic, law and order. Residents in the cantonment who get little satisfaction from complaints relating to these issues, become frustrated and critical of the de-jure control of the army. The civilian staff of the Defence Estates Organisation are also not under direct army control. Their promotion, transfer and discipline, and day-to-day working systems, are controlled by the Defence Estates Organisation, New Delhi, through the CEO concerned. In a large cantonment like Pune, the CEO is unable to cope with the multifarious problems single handed. Matters are further complicated because the Sub Area Commander, as President of the Board, has no direct control over the cantonment staff and civil agencies.

Pune Cantonment Board consists of seven civilian elected members, four nominated military members and three ex-officio members who belong to the administration. In the old days, the voting pattern generally followed the informal directives given by the President, and there were no major problems. But the times have changed. The elected civil members have to be responsive to their vote banks, and the pressure groups formed by commercial and building interests. Thus, there have been occasions when the seven elected members have voted as a group against official policy on important issues. If all the nominated

and ex-officio members are present (a matching total of seven) the voting on any issue would be a tie. In that event, the President is authorised a casting vote. Unfortunately, this provision and safeguard is nullified if any one of the four military members is absent; this often happens when military officers are posted out at short notice. The new nominee, even if named promptly, cannot vote until his name has been gazetted by official notification. This often takes months due to red tape and bureaucratic lethargy, during which time the Board has to function without their vote; the President therefore has no opportunity to exercise his casting vote.

The main source of income of a cantonment is derived from a share of municipal octroi on a population basis. The other taxes that are levied are lower than those levied by the neighbouring civil municipality. A large proportion of the meagre budget is spent on pay and allowances, leaving little for developmental work. Finances are further crippled by the heavy cost of legal expenses which in Pune Cantonment alone, amounted to over rupees two lakhs in 1985. Unless the Octroi share is revised, and a new tax structure introduced, the Cantonment will soon find itself in a severe financial crisis.

#### SUGGESTED REMEDIES

For the reasons discussed above, in Pune Cantonment, civil amenities are seriously stretched, public utilities are inadequate, sanitation is deteriorating and traffic hazards increasing. This situation calls for one of two alternative remedies. First, improve the organisation and system of work. This involves giving the Board adequate staff to exercise proper supervision; this is not possible because of financial restraints. Any restructuring of the system would necessitate a reorganisation of procedures to give the army direct control over the civil staff and law enforcement agencies; this is not possible in a democracy. Thus the first remedy is not a practical proposition. A second suggestion is to excise the civil areas from the Cantonment and hand this over to the adjoining municipality. This proposal is welcomed by the army because it would reduce the administrative burden, and the civil areas are anyway no longer relevant to the functioning of the cantonment. Moreover, the army is earning a bad name whilst attempting to look after a growing civil population with inadequate resources in a role for which it is neither trained nor organised. This suggestion is not unique.

The civil area of Ambala Cantonment (Haryana) was excised in 1977 as a result of recommendations made by a Committee which investigated the problems facing that cantonment. But many are opposed to the suggestion that the civil areas should be excised from military cantonments because this will result in a loss of finance. This is true, but a cost study will reveal that the overall

budget position will be improved as the revenue lost is less than the cost required to meet the minimum expenses needed to maintain the civil areas satisfactorily. Others are reluctant to adopt this suggestion because of a false desire to retain prestigious civil areas. Apart from this, elected members of the Board are against this step as they will lose all the power they now enjoy, and will then have to merge their identities with the larger municipal corporation where they may never be elected in that wider franchise. Lastly, the civilians residing in the cantonment are also against the step because they know that the army, despite all its handicaps, maintains a "personal touch" within its jurisdiction, and attempts to look after the civil areas and population with a devotion and sincerity which the residents may not receive from a large dispassionate corporation.

#### MILITARY REQUIREMENTS

Because the civil areas are clearly no longer relevant to the functioning of the military areas, a few misguided enthusiasts proclaim that military cantonments, themselves, are a relic of colonial rule and quite irrelevant in free India. This conclusion is fallacious. Military stations are an unavoidable necessity for three (among other) basic reasons. First, at any one time, the army has about one third of its strength deployed on the borders or located in "hard" areas where families are not permitted. The remainder will be located in cantonments. (One-third would be resting after having returned from hard areas, and one-third would be getting ready to go to a hard area). Second, cantonments not only house personnel and their families, but also expensive equipment such as tanks, missiles and guns which require special structures to protect them from the sun, rain and temperature. Moreover, lethal ammunition has to be housed in magazines designed to ensure safety. Readers may recall the devastation created in Islamabad (Pakistan) when an ammunition dump blew up in 1988 killing hundreds and destroying a large number of houses. Lastly, every unit, while in a cantonment, has to carry out routine training with its equipment. This requires a minimum of space to enable movement and routine weapon training and tactical drills, with maximum security. For these and other reasons, every nation has some form of military area to house its armed forces in peacetime. In the USA, such areas are termed "forts" but these are in fact like our cantonments in every other respect.

However, modern units, unlike their colonial counter-parts, are self-contained organisations which no longer require to be provided with allied services manned by civilian shopkeepers or tradesmen. Thus, the army, whilst planning new cantonments, does not need civil areas which were unavoidable in the old cantonments. For example, since 1947, and after the Sino-Indian Conflict of 1962, the army has had to move into north-eastern India in a big way. Today, Eastern Army is, man-powerwise, the largest command. It has built, and is

building, new cantonments for its troops and families in under-developed tracts all over Bengal, Assam, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura and Mizoram. Yet, there is only one cantonment officially listed in Eastern Command -- Darjeeling (Bengal) which was built many years ago by the British.

The "cantonments" which are being built today do not function under the Cantonment Act of 1983 because these do not have a civil area. These are purely military areas which function like any other industrial unit: as self-sufficient and self-managed estates which are provided with bulk electricity and water on contract from the state governments concerned. The Military Engineer Service (M.E.S.) looks after housing, power, water and roads; the Army Service Corps provides the rations and the Canteen Service provides the rest. Thus, there is no need for a civil bazaar or a civil area as in the old days.

#### CONCLUSION

Today, a large number of environmental groups and civic bodies are taking an unusually keen interest in the activities of Pune Cantonment. Significantly, these organisations have refrained from excessive comment and criticism of the neighbouring Pune Municipal Corporation. This is perhaps because the army authorities give one and all a patient hearing, and sincerely attempt to respond to workable suggestions. Thus, the focus of the environmentalists has been centred on the small 250 acre complex of the civil area of Pune Cantonment. While this interest is laudable and has been of assistance, as these groups function in a "watch dog" capacity, their criticism has sometimes been one-sided and overdone, specially when such "exposures" gain press publicity and suit their own purpose. Recently, an environmental group obtained a Court injunction which permits it to examine documents and files pertaining to the Board. This has far reaching implications on an all-India level; even effecting all Government administrative organisations, if ratified by the Supreme Court. It is time that the army took steps to protect its reputation.

If the army excises all unwanted areas from its old cantonments, and continues building its new "cantonments" without civil areas, it should be able to solve the major administrative problems facing its cantonment boards. Anyway, it is time that the army sheds its unwanted civil areas which it is neither organised nor trained to administer.