

# The Colonel Commandant Syndrome

## A DERELICT BRITISH RELIC

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Every now and then, atleast twice a month, there appears a news item in all the national papers, of some senior military officer being appointed as the Colonel Commandant of a regiment. It is bad enough the average military officer not understanding the true significance of this redundant institution, but I am sure, the civilian understands it even less so. Of late, many of our military journals have also carried articles on this subject, ending with Brig A S Apte (Retd)'s one published in the Jul-Sep 87 issue of the USI Journal, followed by series of letters in its Apr-Jun 88 issue. However, the matter still remains unresolved, and worse still, ununderstood. Even diehard infanteers, for whose benefit the system of Colonel of the Regiment was evolved, are now veering round to the thought that, this appointment is as derelict for the Indian army, as the JCO rank. Nevertheless, as with all our outlived military traditions and institutions copied from the British, we appear to be scared stiff of changing any thing, even the English ranks of Sergeants and Corporals in our Air Force.

Colonel, traditionally the commanding officer of a regiment, is the highest officer rank below the general officer grades in most armies, or below brigadier in the British and Indian Services. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the colonelcy of a British regiment of infantry or cavalry implied a proprietary right in the organisation. Whether or not the colonel commanded the regiment in the field, he always superintended its finances and interior economy, usually to his profit. In time of war the sovereign invariably selected the generals for his armies from among the proprietary colonels. Meanwhile, active field command of such a regiment was exercised by its lieutenant colonel. As the grade of general became permanent, many generals retained their proprietary colonelcies.

Thus by tradition all British regiments have a senior officer (serving or retired), styled 'colonel of the regiment.' He acts as the father of the regiment, and is usually one of its distinguished senior officers. His duties are confined to certain specified domestic matters of purely regimental concern. He may be any rank above lieutenant colonel, but is usually a general. Corresponding to the colonel of a regiment, there is the title 'colonel commandant' in relation to a corps.

As the tactical doctrine, customs of the Service, the badges of rank, and almost everything else about the Indian Army still follows the British pattern,

even in the concept of colonel commandants we seem to have adopted the system blindly. I find that this bug has now bitten not only the other arms and services of the Army, but more recently it has also penetrated into the culture of our navy and air-force as well, although no such need has been felt in the Royal Navy or the Royal Air Force, around whose traditions our two corresponding Services have been built. I guess for the sake of uniformity (entailing inter-service co-operation and all that) they have been labelled as Captain Commandant and Commodore Commandant respectively in our organisation.

Unlike the other arms and services, after the rank of a lieutenant colonel, the infantry officers branch off to the general cadre and are lost to their regiments, as such they felt the necessity of having an officer of senior rank to represent the regiment or sponsor its cause at the highest level. Thus each infantry regiment had a 'godfather' in the senior ranks to look after the welfare of that regiment.

The above conditions however do not exist in the same manner in the technical arms and services. Take the Corps of Engineers as an example. The Sappers at present have on their Corps establishment itself fifteen general officers, including two lieutenant generals, not to mention the four more today in General Staff appointments. They have therefore sufficient representation in the higher ranks within the Corps itself, to look after their interest and sponsor cases on behalf of the Corps. This being the case, it is for consideration, as to what can a colonel commandant of the Engineers achieve which the E-in-C, and for that matter the other general officers of the Corps, cannot do so in their existing appointments. Whether an officer appeals to the E-in-C in the latter's capacity as the head of his Corps or in his capacity as one of the colonel commandants, is not going to make the slightest difference as to the way in which the appeal will be processed. In fact, if anything, as E-in-C, he will be able to exert more influence than he will be able to do so as a colonel commandant. Thus whereas in the infantry, where the highest rank in the regiment ends with a lieutenant colonel now colonel, the necessity was felt for a general officer to be associated with it to look after its interest, such a condition however does not exist in any of the other arms and services for obvious reasons.

If Colonel Commandants in the Army are associated with the various regimental centres, those in the Navy and Air Force are linked with the various naval branches and air force formations respectively. However, the kind of permanent emotional attachment that an Army man has to his regiment throughout his career, cannot manifest itself in the same way to a

branch or a formation of the Navy and Air Force. This can be attributed to the traditions and career pattern prevailing in these services. Hence, although the other two services can now be proud of also having their own Captain/Commodore Commandants, however, their respective responsibilities would have to be based on traditions quite different to the regimental concept of the Army from which they have been carbon copied. In this respect I am told that, traditionally in the Royal Air Force the emotional attachment of the airman is to the Squadron, and in the Royal Navy the loyalty of the sailor has always been to the Service. I am not aware of how the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force have sorted this out in relation to their respective Captain and Commodore Commandants.

Notwithstanding the above, the new rule whereby an officer has to relinquish his appointment as the Colonel Commandant on retirement from the Service, to my mind has further diluted his effectiveness. In this connection it will be appreciated that, no matter how bold an officer may be, he will always be guarded when writing or saying things to higher authorities at the level of the Chiefs of Staff, while still serving. However, on retirement, he can afford to be more forceful and say things to his former Chief, which he would not dare to do so while in service. It is for consideration therefore, as to why not allow an officer to complete the balance of his tenure as the Colonel Commandant even on retirement, as it used to be before.

Seeing the way our police have also started copying all aspects of army traditions, including the stars systems, and the signia of cross-sword and baton (instead of lathi and hand-cuffs), the time is not far off when, even they will demand a Superintendent Commandant for their forces. If the police get this, then why not the administrative service, who will also want a Secretary Commandant (they already have a Secretary General) for their IAS cadre.

It is time we took a stock of the whole concept of Colonel-Commandants and review it in the light of today's requirements. Although such an institution may have had a real meaning and a dire necessity in the days of 'king and country', it appears to be a bit of a joke, and out of context in the Indian socialistic setting, and more so after the inflation in the senior rank structure of all the Services as a result of the two cadre reviews. Let us muster the courage to scrap this derelict 'British' appointment, which on the face of it, today not only appears farcical, but even hypocritical.