

# Heritage Conservation and the Indian Armed Forces

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## Abstract

*This article is based on a talk given by the author at the Indian Military Heritage Festival at the India International Centre, held on 08 and 09 Oct 2024. It explains the meaning of heritage conservation and outlines the types of heritage generally found in the armed forces. It argues that these need to be conserved in a comprehensive and professional manner. It is, therefore, proposed that an overall policy and planned system be developed to identify, record, conserve, and maintain, both the tangible and intangible heritage of forces in a holistic and systematic way. The creation of a National Military Heritage Trust is suggested for this purpose.*

## Introduction

It is well known that the Indian Armed Forces have a rich history and a valuable heritage. It is, therefore, necessary that it should be looked after in a professional manner. To do so, four basic questions arise:

- What is the meaning of heritage?
- Why should it be conserved?
- What constitutes the heritage of the Indian Armed Forces?
- How can it be conserved?

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To begin with, history is not heritage. Though closely related, the terms have different meanings. History is basically an account of what happened in the past, while heritage refers to what has survived from the past that is deemed valuable today. It must, therefore, possess both the qualities of continuity and value. The values themselves can be of different kinds. The organisation English Heritage categorises these values as being evidential, historic, aesthetic, and communal.<sup>1</sup> The relevant values will normally lie in the significance of a place, object, custom, or tradition, followed by a community or group of people. The item or subject of the heritage itself could be identified by using special techniques that examine both its qualities and its context.

Heritage may be either tangible or intangible. The tangible kinds can be natural, such as rivers, forests, hills, water bodies, etc., or man-made, such as buildings, artefacts, items, and objects of value. The intangible kind includes traditions, customs, rituals, ceremonies, social practices, festivals, and performing arts.

### **Why Should Heritage be Conserved?**

It should be conserved because it is a valuable cultural resource. Heritage is who individuals are—their identity, their origin, their past, present, and future—all connecting in a powerful way. It has been said that “The man who has no inheritance, has no future”.<sup>2</sup> It reflects the aspirations and achievements of a community. Through its emphasis on valuable traditions, it provides individuals with a sense of pride in their past achievements and the zeal to perform still better in the future. If the heritage is not looked after, it will decline—with a loss in the inspirational value and emotional sustenance that it has the power to provide. It becomes the duty of everyone to ensure that this does not actually happen.

### **The Heritage of the Indian Armed Forces**

Most of the tangible kinds can be seen in the army cantonment areas. These include historic buildings, open spaces and old spatial structures, or layout patterns. Then, there are memorials, forts, fortresses, and war cemeteries. There are also items of warfare, vehicles, machinery, artefacts, souvenirs, uniforms, documents and records, and various kinds of regimental heritage items. Likewise, there are aircraft, missiles, ships, submarines, and other service specific items. In fact, it appears that technological growth

ever leads to the development of newer items of warfare, which have the potential to become items of heritage value in the future.

The intangibles kinds include traditions and customs, ceremonial parades, music of army bands, equestrian and sporting events, and a host of traditional ceremonies and social functions. It is often not just the event itself that is significant but the manner of conducting it that is indicative of human virtues and values, which remain invaluable to society, at large, and to the services, in particular. In fact, a number of these customs should fall within the ambit of charters of the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization and other internationally renowned agencies, which have defined the scope and meaning of 'Heritage Customs' worthy of worldwide conservation for posterity.

In a civilisation as old as the Indian, this heritage, especially the intangible kind, goes back many centuries. It extends from the period of the Mahabharata and beyond several thousand years ago, through the Mauryan and Gupta periods, medieval Indian, Sultanate, and Moghul periods, to the British colonial and princely states period, right to 1947 and after. It draws from all major events that have transpired during these times. Furthermore, it may continue to do so in the future, as heritage is constantly being created and re-created with the passage of time. A rich civilisation is, therefore, not only creates objects and traditions of value in the past but constantly continues to do so.

### **How can this Heritage be Conserved?**

It needs a bold policy and an overall framework for its conservation. While several individuals and institutions have done valuable conservation work, these efforts seem to be largely piecemeal. What is really required is a policy framework and a comprehensive plan for the development and management of the history and heritage of the Indian Armed Forces.

One can look at the existing situation of two sources—official records and built form. In case of official records, these are understood to be kept in multiple locations in different departments and organisations, such as the National Archives, Ministry of Defence's History Division, Indian Navy and Indian Air Force's History Divisions and the concerned service headquarters. Some war histories have also been written by independent authors and

are of a laudable quality and standard. Yet, there seems to be a paucity of books and publications on heritage-specific themes, or of thematically developed historical records. An overall planned system to properly identify, record, maintain, educate, research, and disseminate information about valuable historic items and traditions is needed.

As long as the built form of the buildings and sites is concerned, there is the Archaeological Survey of India Act, 1958 (amended 2010), which applies at a national level, along with corresponding state-level acts. Apart from these, there is a provision to protect natural heritage, precincts, buildings, monuments, and artefacts under the Cantonment Act, 2006. However, specific regulations to define and apply these provisions are lacking. At present, there is only a cursory mention of the requirements of heritage conservation in Chapter IV (Duties and powers of Cantonment Boards). Further details on how to go about with this exercise require to be developed and provided.

It is worthwhile here to clarify the meaning of the term 'Conservation'.<sup>3</sup> This technique is defined in broad terms today and can refer to all the processes of looking after a place to retain its cultural significance.<sup>4</sup> Conservation does not mean 'Preservation'. It rather means that any development work that is contemplated should be carried out in a manner that respects the original character of a building, space, or area, where it is to be carried out. Its significant and valuable qualities and features are, therefore, meant to be retained in the proposed development. If required, the techniques of preservation and restoration can be incorporated in the overall conservation exercise that has been planned. This is not the same as preserving or 'Freezing' the use of a building or of an area.

Several cantonments are now over 200 years old. It is learnt that these areas are to be divided into civil and military ones.<sup>5</sup> The cantonments were conceived as singular area enclaves for purposes that were considered necessary at that time. The decision to 'Separate' them in two areas will have obvious implications on their growth and urban development. This will affect demography, population density, circulation and movement patterns, environment, microclimate, and other developmental factors. These aspects ought to be appropriately investigated and their findings

be used in planning the said demarcations. However, the concern here is that of the historic and heritage aspects.

The cantonments, or several parts of them, possess important characteristics in terms of natural and man-made features. The man-made ones include the area's spatial layouts and a significant number of historic buildings. Some architectural and building styles have also gradually developed in them. Some of these characteristics have a heritage value. These could, conceivably, lead to their surrounding areas being considered as 'Heritage Precincts'<sup>6</sup> and, therefore, worthy of conservation activity of some kind. The proposed separation, therefore, has implications for the integrity, retention, care, and management of these characteristics or features, and for the underlying systems of human activities that exist in the cantonments. Therefore, it is considered that a heritage impact assessment of the policy to separate them into two areas should be carried out. Its purpose will be to ensure that there is no loss or damage to valuable historic features or items during the declared separation, or because of the kinds of urban development and growth that is expected to follow in the civil areas.

With regards to war memorials, there are many of these at different locations in the country. They are usually simple structures built by the forces to commemorate their fallen comrades. It is doubtful if their quantity is more than about 150 overall. According to internet sources, there are over 4,000 memorials in Australia<sup>7</sup> and over 70,000 in the United Kingdom (UK).<sup>8</sup> Unlike Britain, India was never a colonial empire that engaged in multiple wars all over the world. As such, making direct comparisons between the number of memorials in the UK with those in India might lead to disparate results. Nonetheless, it does seem that for a country which sent about 1.3 million soldiers in the World War I and 2.5 million in the World War II, the existing number of memorials built to its soldiers is extremely small. The reasons why this should be so may well constitute a separate subject for study. For now, it should suffice that the design, development, care, and maintenance of the existing ones receive due professional care.

Museums and memorials are important means to display the Indian heritage to the visitors. However, the real issue remains about how the heritage should be identified and conserved.

It is suggested that a National Military Heritage Trust be created for this purpose. Such a trust could function under the overall guidance and control of the Chief of Integrated Defence Staff. The United Service Institution of India's Executive Council could act as its trustee. Its main function would be to record and to help maintain historic and heritage material. Appropriate legislation could be drawn up for this purpose. The following are proposed as objectives of such trust:

- Development of criteria and classification system for deciding which objects, items, and practices should be conserved. Grades of importance can be assigned.
- Identification and documentation of the existing items and practices for inclusion in the classifications that are developed.
- Powers to lease or purchase objects of art and artefacts of heritage value to the forces.
- Uniform guidelines for the conservation, preservation, and restoration of the listed items to be developed and communicated to the concerned officials for further action.
- Education and training programmes on history and heritage subjects to be conducted along with research on contemporary practices in these fields.
- Monitoring of conservation and maintenance programmes of the listed articles and practices to ensure compliance with the established standards.

It is further suggested that in due course, a single central facility could be built or designated to house the foregoing essential functions of research, documentation, and archives, along with preservation, education, and display. Wherever possible, visitor education for the public should be developed.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the foregoing objectives and the policies that are adopted, a comprehensive Conservation Development Plan, covering all types of military heritage, could be prepared. If accepted, such a holistic programme and exercise would go a long way to help safeguard and maintain a valuable national resource that India has.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Historic England, *Conservation Principles, Policies, and Guidance for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment*, (UK: English Heritage), Apr 2008, p 7

<sup>2</sup> Noble Margaret E, also known as Sister Nivedita, was an Irish social worker and a disciple of Swami Vivekananda. This quotation is attributed to her.

<sup>3</sup> *Burra Charter*, 1999, Australia. Article 1 of this Charter defines conservation as being all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance, accessed 30 Nov 2024, <https://patinations.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/the-burra-charter.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> *Burra Charter*, p 2, Defines cultural significance as meaning the aesthetic, historic, scientific, social, or spiritual value for past, present, or future generations.

<sup>5</sup> Agencies, “Civilian areas in 13 military cantonments to be transferred to local municipalities”, *Millennium Post*, 01 Jul 2024, accessed 30 Nov 2024, <https://www.millenniumpost.in/bigstories/civilian-areas-in-13-military-cantonments-to-be-transferred-to-local-municipalities-570065>

<sup>6</sup> Heritage Precincts are areas that require conservation for historical or architectural or cultural or ecological reasons. They can be legally accorded such recognition by local and state or central government authority.

<sup>7</sup> Ken Inglis, “War Memorial in the Australian Landscape”, *Miegunnyah Press*, 1998, accessed 30 Nov 2024, <https://cove.army.gov.au/article/war-memorialisation-australia-question-why>

<sup>8</sup> Department For Constitutional Affairs, “War memorials in England and Wales”, *UK Government*, accessed 30 Nov 2024, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/618270f48fa8f5297b6440de/jts0101.ods>

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