

**CANTONMENTS CAN BE CONVERTED TO MILITARY STATIONS ONLY
ON A CASE BY CASE BASIS**

BY

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As per press reports, the army is mulling the closure of cantonments and converting military areas within them into military stations. It has presently ordered a study into the same expected to be completed by the end of the year, though the MoD has denied any immediate actions in a tweet.

The first cantonment was established by the British in the late 18th century in Barrackpore. It subsequently spread across the country. Presently there are 62 military cantonments and over 200 military stations in the country. The intention of the Britishers in establishing cantonments was to locate the army away from towns in open country, where they could reside and train and possibly be away from the influence of the freedom struggle. It must be remembered that the British employed the army in suppressing the freedom struggle.

Cantonments thus were open, green and well protected areas for the military to reside. They possessed within them small pockets of civil areas which had shops providing basic amenities and some residences. With passage of time, towns grew close to cantonments for provision of services essential to maintain them as also for additional security.

Post-Independence and economic growth, builder lobbies sought the advantage of clean and green cantonments to build colonies in open grounds around them. An essential part of many cantonments were military farms created for providing fresh produce for soldiers residing in these cantonments, which are presently on the verge of closure.

To run cantonments, the British had enacted the Cantonment Act of 1924, which was reviewed, and a fresh act issued in 2006. To ensure smooth running of the cantonments, the British created the Military Lands and Cantonment Service in 1926. This service is presently known as the Indian Defence Estates Service (IDES). The service is headed by the Director General Defence Estates (DGDE). The initial aim behind creating this service was to hire professionals to manage land and services within the cantonment, thus relieving soldiers from this responsibility.

Management of cantonment lands has three aspects. The land is owned by the MoD, utilized by the army and managed by the DGDE, a complete state of confusion. Defence lands also include a multitude of defunct ordnance factories which should be closed at the earliest. Over the years the DGDE

discarded its primary aim and became a law by itself. Its involvement in land scams went to such an extreme level that in 2010, the Controller General of Defence Accounts (CGDA) in a report recommended its disbandment.

The report held the DGDE responsible for failures in all its four charters, audit, accounting, acquisition of lands and fiscal management. It is blamed for piling up 13,000 land dispute cases, now in courts, which would cost the government 5,000 crore to settle. Salary to its staff alone costs the exchequer 200 crores annually.

In cantonments, the DGDE is responsible for all aspects of provision of facilities for its civilian populace akin to municipal authorities in cities. It runs hospitals, schools, provides facilities including power, water and sanitation. It collects taxes and rentals as also charges all heavy vehicles transiting on its roads. However, its income remains well below its expenditure which needs to be offset by grants from the centre upto the tune of over 450 crores. Since they function as separate entities, they are ignored by the state from central grants allocated for development.

Post the Adarsh scam the MoD issued 'Guidelines for grant of no-objection Certificates for building construction' in Jun 2011. Under these guidelines the army is to provide sanction for any civilian construction within 100 meters and for four storey buildings and beyond within 500 meters of military establishments. This is to be given by the station commander after satisfying himself that the building does not impinge on security concerns. These rules have led to anger within the builders' community, many of whose projects have been stalled during construction and are presently battling these directives in court. However, for the armed forces, these guidelines add to its security.

Military stations on the contrary were established post-independence and remain under the control of military authority. There are no civilian pockets within them. The DGDE has minimum role in its functioning and maintenance, except being responsible for the land. These have over the years become ideal townships, with facilities which no municipality can ever dream to provide. Bangalore is an excellent example of multiple military establishments spread across the city, separated by large civilian localities.

Considering the above, the closure of cantonments need to be viewed. Cantonments have largely been failures as the DGDE has failed to care for its civilian population. Civilian pockets remain the most neglected, while areas under the army remain clean, green and well maintained.

In some cantonments there are civilian pockets which are segregated and can be easily handed over to local municipal authorities. Some examples are Gopinath and Sadar Bazar in Delhi, Sadar bazar in Lucknow and the

Deolali market and residential areas. There would be many more. However, this is not the situation in every cantonment.

If it is attempted across the board akin to the MoD directive of opening roads, then small army pockets would remain isolated and become a security hazard. Hence it would need to be done on a case by case basis. The easiest would be handing civilian townships outside military dominated areas to municipalities along with the infrastructure created.

Further, if the government is desirous of closing cantonments, then it needs to undertake the following steps. Firstly, convert the MoD guidelines into a government statute thereby ensuring cantonments/ future military stations are protected from unwarranted constructions which become a security hazard.

Secondly, hand over civil townships within cantonments to local municipal corporations. This would save over 450 crores available to the army for modernization. The remaining areas, even with limited civilian population be converted to military stations.

Thirdly, commence the disbandment of the DGDE on similar lines as military farms as areas are handed over. Maintaining them would only be a financial drain. They should be offered alternate posts/ early retirement. Only a core group would need to be maintained. It would save the exchequer 200 crores.

Fourthly, all open grounds within cantonments/ under the charge of cantonments, including parade grounds become part of military stations. Fifthly, close defunct ordnance factories and dispose their lands.

Finally and most importantly the MoD should not consider cantonment lands as commercial lands available for sale to builders or select relatives and friends of the political hierarchy, as this would be closely monitored by the press and the military lobby.

The proposal of closing cantonments does sound logical as managing them including its growing civilian population is becoming prohibitive in costs, eating into the defence budget and restricting modernization of the armed forces. However, the same should be done in a sequential manner. Enactment of laws to ensure security and sanctity of military stations emerging from present cantonments is absolutely essential.

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