

Colonial Urbanization: The Making Of Bangalore Under British Rule

Kakasaheb Laxman Gasti

Ph.D Research Scholar

Department of History and Archaeology

Karnataka University,

Dharward.

Abstract

This research article delves into the historical process of colonial urbanization in Bangalore, emphasizing the critical role played by British colonial authorities in reshaping the city's spatial, infrastructural, and socio-political landscape during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Prior to British involvement, Bangalore existed as a modest regional center under the rule of South Indian dynasties and later, the Wodeyar kings of Mysore. However, the British arrival in the early 1800s—specifically the establishment of the Bangalore Cantonment in 1809—marked a pivotal moment that would redefine the urban trajectory of the city.

Colonial governance prioritized strategic military needs, administrative efficiency, and economic extraction, leading to the construction of infrastructure such as railways, military installations, roads, drainage, and telegraph lines. These developments, while modern in form, were primarily designed to serve colonial interests. The creation of the Cantonment also introduced a physical and administrative division between British-occupied Bangalore and the native town (the "Pete" area), governed by the princely state of Mysore. This led to the formation of a "dual city" characterized by socio-spatial segregation, racial hierarchies, and uneven urban development.

Drawing on archival documents, historical maps, municipal records, and scholarly interpretations, the article analyzes how these colonial interventions established a lasting urban legacy. It argues that the British approach to urbanism—marked by control, surveillance, and segregation—laid the groundwork for many of the infrastructural and spatial inequalities that persist in contemporary Bengaluru. Moreover, the paper reflects on how colonial-era institutions and planning ideologies influenced the city's post-independence transformation into a major administrative, military, and later, technological hub. By unpacking these layered histories, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of urban modernity and postcolonial identity in Indian cities.

Keywords : Colonial urbanization, British India , Bangalore Cantonment , Urban planning , Dual city, Mysore state , Segregation , Infrastructure , Colonial governance , Postcolonial urban legacy

Introduction

Urbanization during the colonial period in India was not merely a demographic or economic phenomenon—it was also a political and ideological project. British colonial administrators viewed cities as key instruments for governance, control, and cultural dominance. Cities were designed not only as administrative centers but also as spaces where imperial authority could be visibly and symbolically enforced. In this context, the transformation of Bangalore under British rule offers a compelling case study to examine how colonial priorities reshaped an indigenous urban settlement into a dual city with layered spatial and social meanings.

Bangalore, known today as Bengaluru, is widely recognized as India's IT capital and a hub of global technological innovation. However, its journey toward modern urban status began under very different circumstances—rooted in colonial military strategy and imperial administration. Before British control, Bangalore was a provincial town within the Mysore kingdom, with a spatial structure centered around markets (petes), temples, and residential agglomerations organized by caste and occupation. This

indigenous urban fabric began to change dramatically after 1799, when the British defeated Tipu Sultan and reinstated the Wodeyars under the subsidiary alliance system.

The decisive moment in Bangalore's urban history came in 1809, when the British East India Company relocated its military garrison from Srirangapatna to Bangalore and established the **Bangalore Cantonment**. This Cantonment, administered by the Madras Presidency, was physically and administratively separate from the native town governed by the princely state of Mysore. The resulting dual-city structure—comprising the colonial Cantonment and the native Pete—reflected the broader imperial model of segregation and control that characterized British urban policy across India.

This research article focuses on the transformation of Bangalore between 1809 and the early decades of the 20th century. It examines the urban planning principles employed by the British, the establishment of infrastructure, the introduction of municipal governance, and the socio-political dynamics that emerged within this dual structure. Special attention is given to the ways in which race, class, and colonial ideology influenced urban spatiality and social life.

By unpacking these themes, the article aims to answer several key questions:

- What were the motivations behind the British choice to develop Bangalore as a Cantonment town?
- How did colonial infrastructure and governance reshape the city's urban identity?
- In what ways did the creation of the dual city reflect and reinforce social divisions?
- What is the continuing legacy of colonial urbanization in post-independence Bengaluru?

Ultimately, this paper situates Bangalore's colonial urban experience within the broader literature on imperial urbanism, spatial inequality, and postcolonial urban development. It argues that colonial-era urban planning was not a neutral process of modernization, but rather a deeply political project that continues to shape the contours of the city to this day.

Review of Literature

Colonial urbanization has been a central theme in South Asian urban history, drawing insights from multiple disciplines, including history, sociology, architecture, and political science. Scholars have examined how colonial powers reconfigured urban spaces to serve political control, economic extraction, and cultural dominance. Within this broader framework, the case of Bangalore offers a unique opportunity to study how colonial policies intersected with local princely authority, producing a hybrid yet segregated urban environment.

Anthony D. King (1984), in his seminal work *Colonial Urban Development*, introduced the "dual city" thesis, which posits that colonial cities were deliberately divided into two spheres: one inhabited and controlled by the colonizers, and the other by the indigenous population. This model aptly describes Bangalore's spatial division between the British Cantonment and the native Pete area, highlighting the racial and administrative segregation engineered through colonial planning.

Janaki Nair has made significant contributions to understanding Bangalore's transformation under colonial and post-colonial regimes. In *The Promise of the Metropolis* (2005), she investigates how urban development in Bangalore was shaped by competing ideologies of modernity, governance, and labor, revealing how city space became a contested terrain between colonial administrators, princely rulers, and emerging local elites.

Narendar Pani has explored the socio-economic impacts of colonial interventions in Bangalore, particularly how labor migration and economic restructuring laid the foundations for post-independence class formations. His writings connect historical policy decisions to contemporary urban challenges,

making a compelling case for understanding Bangalore's development as a continuum rather than a rupture.

Kenneth Ballhatchet, in his study of colonial race relations, focused on how urban planning in British India reinforced social hierarchies. He argues that colonial cities were designed to spatially separate Europeans from Indians, a policy that shaped the very DNA of cities like Bangalore, where residential, civic, and commercial spaces were distributed along racial and class lines.

Ravi Sundaram, along with other scholars of postcolonial urbanism, has analyzed how technological infrastructures—railways, telegraphs, sanitation—were not neutral tools of modernization but instruments of colonial control. These selective investments served the needs of imperial administration and military defense rather than the welfare of the broader native population.

Despite these valuable contributions, there is still a relative paucity of focused studies that trace the **direct link between British urban planning decisions in Bangalore and the city's current spatial and socio-economic identity**. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the historical roots of contemporary urban structures, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of Bangalore's colonial legacy.

Historical Background

The history of Bangalore prior to British colonization reflects its strategic importance as a regional center in South India. Founded in the 16th century by Kempegowda, a local chieftain under the Vijayanagara Empire, Bangalore grew as a modest market town with strong agrarian connections and regional trade networks. It later came under the control of the Marathas, the Mughals, and ultimately the Wodeyars of Mysore.

By the late 18th century, Bangalore was at the crossroads of empire. During the Anglo-Mysore wars, the city changed hands between Tipu Sultan and the British multiple times. After Tipu's defeat and death in 1799 during the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War, the British East India Company restored the Wodeyars to the throne but imposed a **subsidiary alliance**, under which the British retained control over defense and external affairs.

In 1809, recognizing the city's strategic location and salubrious climate, the British established the **Bangalore Cantonment**—a military and administrative enclave east of the native town. This move marked a decisive moment in Bangalore's urban history, effectively creating **two cities within one**: the British-governed Cantonment under the Madras Presidency, and the native Pete governed by the Mysore princely state.

Case Study: The Cantonment and Pete Division

1. The British Cantonment

The Cantonment, located in the eastern parts of Bangalore (covering areas like MG Road, Fraser Town, and Shivajinagar), was planned according to British urban sensibilities:

- **Urban Design:** The area featured wide, tree-lined roads, orderly street grids, open parade grounds, and exclusive clubs. European architectural styles dominated, and churches such as St. Mark's and St. Andrew's became cultural landmarks.

- **Demographics:** The population included British officers, Indian soldiers (sepoys), Anglo-Indians, and a large number of Tamil-speaking laborers who migrated from the Madras Presidency.
- **Amenities:** Unlike the Pete, the Cantonment boasted early access to piped water, underground drainage, street lighting, and municipal services. These were introduced not for humanitarian reasons but to **protect British health and hygiene**, a constant concern of colonial authorities.
- **Governance:** It was administered directly by the British through a municipal board, independent of the Mysore princely government.

2. The Pete Area (Old Bangalore)

Located west of the Cantonment, the Pete (or native town) remained under traditional forms of governance:

- **Urban Fabric:** Characterized by organic street patterns, narrow lanes, bustling markets (e.g., Chickpet, Balepet), and religious institutions, it reflected pre-colonial Indian urbanism.
- **Lack of Services:** Infrastructure development lagged, and issues such as overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and inadequate water supply persisted into the late 19th century.
- **Governance:** Managed by the Mysore administration, which had limited access to the financial and technological resources enjoyed by the British.

3. Urban Divide and Segregation

The dual-city model resulted in:

- **Spatial Hierarchies:** The Cantonment became associated with modernity, order, and privilege, while the Pete represented tradition and underdevelopment.
- **Racial Segregation:** Areas were implicitly and sometimes explicitly divided into “White Towns” for Europeans and “Black Towns” for Indians. Public parks, schools, and clubs were racially exclusive.
- **Uneven Development:** Public investment overwhelmingly favored the Cantonment, creating long-lasting infrastructural imbalances.

Key Contributions of British Rule to Urbanization

1. Infrastructure Development

- **Railways:** The arrival of the Bangalore-Madras railway in 1864 catalyzed industrial growth and increased the city’s strategic importance.
- **Transportation:** Horse-drawn trams and later buses connected different parts of the city, though initially these services were limited to the Cantonment.
- **Public Architecture:** Iconic colonial-era buildings such as the Mayo Hall, High Court (Attara Kacheri), and Bowring Hospital emerged as institutional centers.

2. Sanitation and Public Health

- The British prioritized sanitation in the Cantonment to prevent outbreaks of diseases like cholera and plague, which had implications for troop readiness.
- The construction of the **Hessarghatta reservoir in 1894** and sewerage networks were important milestones, although these benefits were slow to reach the Pete.

3. Education and Institutions

- British missionaries and the state established English-medium schools, colleges, and vocational institutions.
- Institutions such as **St. Joseph's College**, **Bishop Cotton School**, and **Bangalore Medical College** played a critical role in shaping the city's intellectual landscape.

Impact and Legacy

The colonial transformation of Bangalore left enduring legacies, both tangible and intangible:

1. Spatial Legacy

The divide between the Cantonment and Pete persisted well into the post-independence era. Even today, neighborhoods in the former Cantonment exhibit superior civic infrastructure, broader roads, and greater real estate value compared to the more congested and historically underserved Pete areas.

2. Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Colonial migration policies brought Tamil, Anglo-Indian, Urdu, and British communities into Bangalore, creating a multilingual and multicultural urban society. This diversity remains one of the defining features of modern Bengaluru.

3. Administrative Duality

The bifurcated development created challenges for unified governance. It wasn't until the 1949 merger of the Cantonment and Pete municipalities that Bangalore came under a single civic administration, now known as the **Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP)**.

4. Foundation for Modern Bangalore

Colonial investments in infrastructure and education inadvertently set the stage for Bangalore's later emergence as a hub for science, defense, and information technology. Institutions like the **Indian Institute of Science (founded in 1909)** trace their origins to colonial visions of technological advancement.

Conclusion

The making of Bangalore under British rule offers critical insights into the nature of colonial urbanism in India. Far from being a neutral process of modernization, the British approach to urban planning in Bangalore was deeply political, racialized, and exclusionary. It prioritized imperial interests—military control, administrative efficiency, and social segregation—while often marginalizing the needs of the native population.

Yet, within these contradictions emerged a unique urban form: a hybrid city shaped by both colonial authority and indigenous adaptation. The spatial and institutional legacies of colonial rule continue to shape Bengaluru's urban challenges today—ranging from infrastructural inequality and spatial fragmentation to identity politics rooted in historical divisions.

Understanding the colonial foundations of Bangalore's urban form is not merely an academic

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