

## Cantonments in Himachal Pradesh: historical perspectives and colonial imprints

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### ABSTRACT

Himachal Pradesh, a small hill state in India, has historically been a focal point of British interest for various strategic and environmental reasons. Sharing a historical connection with present-day Punjab, the region was often referred to as the 'Hill Cantonments Region,' established by the British during their colonial rule. This paper examines the establishment of cantonments in Himachal Pradesh from the nineteenth century onwards, delving into the historical context and underlying factors that motivated their development in different parts of the state. It explores the strategic, climatic, and geographic considerations that influenced the selection of these locations and their role within the broader colonial framework. The study concludes that while cantonments in the Shimla and Punjab hill regions did not directly contribute to significant colonial urbanization, they offered advantages such as scenic beauty, isolation, altitude, favorable terrain, ample personal space, salubrious climate, familiar topography, efficient natural drainage systems, and strategic positioning. These factors not only served British colonial interests but also ensured the enduring relevance of these cantonments in post-independence governance and development.

**Keywords:** *Cantonment, Shimla, Solan, Subathu, Jatogh, Dagshai, Yol.*

### Introduction

Himachal Pradesh, a picturesque hill state in India, captivated the British during the 19th century for various reasons. This paper delves into the establishment of cantonments by the British in Himachal Pradesh during this period. For Thousands of years, humanity has gazed upon the Himalayas with a sense of awe and respect. These majestic peaks were viewed as sanctuaries for profound reflection and detachment from the hustle and bustle of

daily life. They were believed to be the adobe of the Gods. Thus, the centuries of pilgrimages produced temples and hermitages (Gillian Write 1991, p. 14). Still, there were no major urban settlements except Trigarta, Chamba and Kuluta prior to 17th century as the landscape had little appeal and mountains were difficult geographic terrains (Write 1991, p. 14). Uncomfortable long journeys restricted the interaction between plains and the hills. For most of the year, the mountains belonged to the hill people, and nomadic herders and scattered settlements, both urban and rural, tended to be confined to the valleys, which were the locations of cultivation and trade mostly.

In western Himalayan history, hills remained part of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh mostly. Insight into the early 19th-century backdrop of the Punjab hill states can be attained by delving into the works of J. Hutchison and J.P.H. Vogel, authors of a comprehensive two-volume tome titled “History of the Punjab Hill States.” Their meticulous research not only delineates the geographical features of the area but also furnishes invaluable insights into its political structure during the pre-British era. In the course of the topographical description of the *Punjab Hill States*, they shed abundant light on how these hill states were affected by the political change under the Gurkhas and provided information on the arrival of the British in the Shimla hills (Sharma 2019, p. 2).

The British were unaware of the health benefits of the Shimla hills until the 19th century when the threat posed by the Gurkhas in the hills appeared. After 1809, the Gurkhas began to increase their territory in the Shimla Hills and cemented their military might under Amar Singh Thapa (Simla District Census 1961, p. 9). Following their conquest of minor chieftains, the Gurkhas fortified numerous strongholds along the Sikh borders, aiming to assert their supremacy. Their rule was marked by unrelenting severity and dominance over the region. After subduing Sirmur and the Shimla Hills and gradually capturing the majority of the hill fortifications between the rivers Jumuna and Sutlej, they established their capital at Arki, 20 miles west of Shimla (Census 1961, p. 9). They converted existing tribes into slavery and

imposed the harsh taxes on the impoverished. The result of this brutal policy was that many of the oppressed mountaineers eagerly desired to place themselves under British protection to drive the Gurkhas out of their country (Francis White 1838, p. 10).

The British promptly embraced the proposal for primarily two compelling reasons: first and foremost, they perceived a looming threat from the escalating influence of the Gurkhas, who commanded a critical trade route to Tibet and central Asia. Secondly, The Gurkhas, encouraged by their long courses of success in subduing many mountainous chiefs, emboldened them to gradually encroach on the British outposts of the low belt of wood and marshy *Tarrai* which lay at the foot of the hills, stretching along from the Bhrmaputra to Rohilakhund chiefly belonging to the states under the British Government, or to those which were under its protection (Sharma 2019, p. 3).

In 1814, the British made the decisive resolution to oust the Gurkhas from the hill territories with the aim of annexing the strategically vital hill regions and safeguarding their holdings in the plains against Gurkha assaults. The British army officer Major Ochterlony led the campaign against the Gurkhas (Final Settlement Report of Simla District 1884, p. 6). Hence, it was in 1814 that the British first made their appearance in this region (Hamilton 1820, p. 618). Following the defeat of the Gurkhas, a treaty known as the Treaty of Sagauli was signed in 1815. Through this treaty, the British assumed control of the hill tracts. Subsequently, in the 1840s, the East India Company established several cantonments in the lower Shimla hills to serve as auxiliary bases for soldiers from the Bengal presidency who were stationed in the sweltering plains of India.

‘Cantonment’ is taken from the French word ‘canton,’ which means quarters (Lewis 1997, p. 77). The term was widely utilised in India. It described the military installations across the region, often designed based on a layout resembling a permanent camp. The cantonments were designed to meet the military and

residential requirements of the officers, troops and ancillary personnel, both European and native (Moore 1862, p. 17). A Cantonment was an area marked out from the general civil administration and set apart as a place in which the first consideration was the health of the troops (Fell 1929, p. 114). In broader contexts, the term “cantonments” has been defined as the temporary living accommodations erected by the army for soldiers engaged in manoeuvres. For over 150 years, it has been applied to the enduring military bases in India where troops were regularly stationed. A study of cantonment has a great significance. Indeed, the cantonment has an institution that was instrumental in building the British Empire in India (Jacob 1994, pp. 1-2).

The precise historical origins of each cantonment are often challenging to trace. Some were obtained through compensation to the original landholders, while others came under government control through conquest or appropriation. Still, others resulted from treaties negotiated with the relevant ruling chiefs. The foremost objective of establishing cantonments was to ensure the health, welfare and discipline of the troops quartered there with a higher level of sanitation and public safety in a healthier environment, free from epidemics and crimes (Standing Committee on Defence 1998, p. 1).

The establishment of cantonments as a matter of policy was initiated by Robert Clive in 1765. Originally, cantonments were intended solely as barracks or other structures built for accommodating troops. However, by the early 19th century, the term had evolved to encompass a broader meaning, indicating a designated area exclusively reserved for military use. Clive recommended to the Select Committee on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1765 for the ‘approbation’ building of cantonments for at least 1200 Europeans and 5000 sepoys at Boinpore near Kasimbazar (Jacob 1994, p. 19). Though the British ruled over a large number of countries on all continents, they did not establish cantonment anywhere else (Committee on Defence, p. 1). They built 114 cantonments situated throughout India. Over half of the settlements were located on the plains, some 5% of them between 1200 and 7800ft. above sea level

in the so-called ‘hill stations’ (King 1976, p. 97). The cantonment towns in the hills were established to fulfil four basic requirements:

- a) To fulfil military and defence roles aimed at safeguarding the hill territories from external invasions.
- b) To offer secluded woodland environments for the British community, facilitating unrestricted interaction amongst themselves while enjoying relative isolation from diverse social groups.
- c) To uphold law and order within the area.
- d) To ensure a salubrious climate devoid of the pollution, heat, and unsanitary conditions prevalent in the plains, thus promoting the swift recovery of sick British soldiers

### **Establishment of cantonments in Himachal Pradesh**

In 1815, the first colonial settlement, which emerged in the Shimla hill region, was the cantonment town of Sabathu. It was situated on a spur of not more than 4500 ft. above sea level on the old road from Kalka to Shimla (Gazetteer of Simla District 1888-89, p. 113). The name Sabathu is a combination of two words: ‘*Suba*’, meaning a province, and ‘*thaur*’, meaning a seat or place in Hindi. This place was once the seat of the Gurkha province. During their regime, the Gurkhas appeared to have garrisoned the place with their troops and built a fort that had two ‘Guard Tower’ (Census 1961, p. 12). On defeating and ousting the Gurkhas in 1815, the British official Sir Ochterlony retained the stronghold of the Sabathu in his hand as a political and military outpost, as the family to which it originally belonged was extinct, and its possession was claimed by several contending parties, among whom were the ranks of Keonthal and Baghat, then in disgrace; and also it was considered to afford a significant military position for securing to the British the undisturbed command of the lower hills (Select committee on Indian Territories 1852-53, p. 3).

Lieutenant Ross, the foremost British political overseer, bestowed with the title of Assistant Political Agent for the hill territories, elected Sabathu as his central command. Commencing operations from a swiftly erected wooden edifice in 1818. Following Ross's tenure, Captain Charles Kennedy assumed leadership in Sabathu. In due course, he erected his esteemed 'Durbar Hall', subsequently renowned as Kennedy House, further solidifying colonial administration's presence in the vicinity. It became the principal cantonment of British troops, which, until 1842, served as headquarters of the Nassiri Battalion (Indian Territories 1852-53, p. 3). In 1843, the European regiment occupied Sabathu for the first time, and the total outlay at Sabathu was 2 30,427 rupees (Indian Territories, p. 3). Now, the Western command has a Gurkha training centre at this place.

By the dawn of 1830, Shimla had ascended to prominence as the acknowledged governmental and military summer headquarters of India. To Lord Dalhousie, it was not Shimla's beauty that mattered but its geographical location: "You have one in Punjab, another in North-West Frontier yet enough to influence Oudh." Growth was rapid in the next decades or two, and a number of new Himalayan stations were opened. Gradually, it became the custom for the provincial government to officially transfer administrative operations to the summer capital for several months each year, and also, the seasonal movement of people to hill stations was established (Spencer and Thomas 1948, p. 641).

In 1840, a decree was passed to broaden the scope of hill settlements, extending their benefits to more infirm troops serving in the plains. Therefore, due to the nearness to the plains of Punjab, in around 1840, military authorities regarded the Kasauli hill tract, at an elevation of 6,365 feet above sea level, as a suitable location for garrisoning the troops (Gazetteer Simla District, p. 114). During that year, Colonel Tapp, serving as the political agent at Sabathu, embarked on the inaugural survey of the Kasauli hills. Subsequently, in 1841, Sir Henry Lawrence, assuming the role of Political Agent at Sabathu, erected the premier bungalow, "Sunnyside," positioned directly opposite the Sabathu Ridge,

overlooking his daughter's resting place within Sabathu. In 1842, after a survey, it was decided to develop a cantonment in this area, and Kasauli was made into a permanent military station (Handbook of Kasauli Cantonment 1923, p. 8). This pargana was originally belonged to the Baghat State. In 1842, the British government made an effort to build up a cantonment for the sum of Rs. 5,000 and an annual payment of Rs. 507 (Gazetteer, p.29). In 1863, further land was acquired from the Rana of Baghat. The first troop which occupied the cantonment was the 13 Somerset Light Infantry on their return from Afghanistan in 1843 (District Census 1961, p. 12). In the valleys, the cultivation was rich and varied; the patches or terraces assumed the appearance of tolerably sized fields (Purbury 1842, p. 124).

Dagshai was established as another British military station 10.7 miles northeast of Kasauli (Gazetteer of Simla District 1997 [1904], p. 2). In 1847, the illustrious East India Company laid the cornerstone of this settlement, securing five villages from the esteemed Maharaja of Patiala, Bhupinder Singh, with magnanimity unmatched, granting them freely. These villages bore the names of Dabbi, Baddhtiala, Chunawad, Jawag, and Dagshai, forever woven into the fabric of this burgeoning endeavour. The new cantonment was named after the last village name, as it was the largest and most strategically located (The British originally acquired this land to build a jail to keep the foreign political prisoners (The Tribune Saturday Plus 1999). It was the only cantonment in Shimla Hills which had a jail built on a branch road below the barracks. Dagshai jail was constructed in 1849 at a cost of Rs. 72,875 (Census 1961, p. 12). However, the outlay of Dagshai cantonment was rupees 3,49,031 (Report on Indian Territories, p. 3).

Jutogh was earmarked as an additional location for quartering troops owing to its adjacency to Shimla, deemed strategically advantageous for military operations. The station of Jutogh was situated on a detached spur hill overlooking the Old Kalka Road Shimla Road, some three miles from the west end of Shimla

(Gazetteer Simla District, p. 115). It was a small military station. The land was obtained from the State of Patiala in 1843 in exchange for two villages, namely the Dhurrai and Tohal, in the pargana of Bharauli; a sum of Rs. 1,931 as a compensation to the proprietors of the soil (Gazetteer, p. 29). A Gurkha regiment first occupied it (Gazetteer, p. 109).

With the arrival of the British in the Shimla Hills, Kalka's significance burgeoned, emerging as the initial lowland tract to intersect the foothills. Recognizing its strategic value, the British deemed imperative to assert dominion over a parcel of land nestled at the hill's base, ample enough for the establishment of a bustling marketplace and depot along the communication route to Shimla. Thus, in 1843, diplomatic exchanges were initiated with the Maharaja of Patiala to materialize the creation of a station at Kalka

In addition to fulfilling the requirements of European officials and soldiers for garrisoning in the invigorating hill environment, the British recognized the significance of providing the benefits of the hill climate to the European children of those in the service of the East India Company. Thus, Sanawar, renowned as the Henry Lawrence Military Asylum, situated 3.5 miles northeast of Kasauli, was designated as a site for the asylum, subsequently evolving into a renowned educational institution. The states of Patiala and Baghat bordered it (Gazetteer of Simla 1904, p. 2). In 1847, the British Government assumed control of the land occupied by the Lawrence Military Asylum, which previously belonged to the State of Baghat, integrating it into their territorial domain. In 1852, the institution was opened with 14 children and Mrs. George Lawrence undertook its management (The Lawrence Assylum Kussowlee 1850, p. 42).

The last hilltop settlement in this region was the Solan cantonment. Solan was a small plot of land on the southern slope of Krol mountain, on the Cart Road between Kalka and Shimla, 31 miles from Shimla and 9.4 miles beyond Dagshai (Gazetteer of Punjab Province 1984, p. 350). In 1862, the site was initially earmarked as a rifle range for the troops stationed at Dagshai, following a requisition from C.C. Dagshai for land near Solan for this purpose.



Consequently, negotiations commenced with the Wazir of Baghat for the acquisition of the land and the identification of an appropriate location. This tract was transferred to the military authorities under the condition that, during periods of inactivity at the rifle ranges, neighbouring village zamindars could avail the land for cattle grazing. Subsequently, it became evident that as hospitals and other military infrastructure had been established along the Solan ridge, integral to the cantonment, the original range boundaries required adjustment to encompass this area for policing and sanitation measures.

Dalhousie Cantonment is a town in the Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh. In the wake of 1857, the Military Department of Govt of India expanded its survey of the lower Himalayas, identifying a suitable location for building sanatoria and cantonment for quartering British soldiers and military units. It was a cool and healthy hill station justified on strategic and health grounds. In the following years, Baloon, Bakloh, Chakrata, and Ranikhet in the western lower Himalayas were established. In 1863, one-third of British troops in India should be located in the hill station cantonment Dalhousie was first surveyed in 1853. In 1866, Bakloh was acquired as a Gorkha cantonment from the raja of Chamba. In 1868, British troops moved into barracks in Bakloh. By 1878, an 18-foot road connected the new cantonment to the plains.

Yol is a cantonment in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh; the town gets its name from Yol (Young Officers Living), a small town established by the British Indian army in 1849. The Yol cantonment was built in 1942. Yol was allocated to a prisoner-of-war camp that hosted German soldiers in the 1<sup>st</sup> World War and Italian soldiers in the Second World War.

These military settlements were established adjacent to the lands of hostile hill tribes to bolster the frontiers and forestall potential skirmishes. Dominance over these pivotal sites in the Shimla hills was deemed imperative for reinforcing their political influence in

India. Moreover, the British envisioned that by relocating a significant populace, encompassing civilians and military personnel alike, to the invigorating English climate of the hills, they could forge a secure nucleus not only for the governance of India but also for its extensive cultural and societal development. Erected atop open hill summits, commanding views over the plains, these installations potentially mirrored the British confidence in their unassailable supremacy. Consequently, strategic importance took precedence over considerations of accessibility. The urbanization scheme in the Shimla hills during the British period was a meticulously planned endeavour. Mapping helped usher in the planned development and growth of the towns around Shimla. Their command of industrial technology and knowledge of cartography enabled them to build settlements at such great heights (King, pp. 57-65).

The military cantonment boasted meticulously designed structures and neatly arranged streets. It encompassed barracks for infantry and artillery units, with or without their families, along with separate officer bungalows, hospitals, the Mall Road, cemeteries, churches, and an officer's club. Additionally, it featured drill grounds, rifle ranges, military supply depots, water houses, magazines, gun sheds, workshops, dairy farms, and bazaars to fulfil daily needs. Each cantonment ensured efficient communication through paved roads, rail links, post offices, telegraph lines, telephone connections, and police stations. The administration of the cantonment was managed and supervised by a committee under the direction of the commanding officers of the area (Grewal 2009, p. 98).

The colonization of the Shimla hills and Punjab hills undoubtedly encountered formidable obstacles. However, these narratives of hardship are frequently marginalized in colonial discourse, which tends to depict territorial acquisitions as seamless processes. Such portrayals perpetuate the unchallenged legitimacy attributed to 'white' settlements. Throughout the British era, numerous villages surrounding established towns underwent complete relocation or, in certain instances, displacement to make room for the

establishment of new cantonments. Moreover, in the development of hill stations, deforestation depleted hills of their wooded areas, while valley inhabitants were deprived of their water sources, redirected to cater to the needs of the stations. Hill rulers were compelled to provide forced labour, known as ‘begaris’, for road and construction projects. In essence, these instances starkly illustrate the dire circumstances faced by the impoverished hill communities, as the British stripped the native inhabitants of these regions of their fundamental rights.

Accordingly, in the midst of the 19th century, in line with the altered environmental policies, these hill settlements were acquired after prolonged negotiations with local rulers to serve administrative, educational, recreational, and military purposes. They provided a haven where European invalids could recuperate from the heat and diseases of the tropics, while also reinforcing a sense of cultural superiority. These newly established urban centres in the Shimla hill region were primarily situated along ridges, offering commanding views of the valleys and overlooking the plains of Punjab. Over time, these hill towns flourished to accommodate the sizable European population.

The colonial urban settlements in the Shimla and Punjab hills didn’t form a cohesive cluster or continuous chain of urban centres. Instead, they comprised several detached tracts acquired over time for various purposes such as establishing sanatoriums, maintaining peace, and consolidating political power in India. The geography of the hills played a pivotal role in shaping these urban centres. Factors like scenic beauty, isolation, altitude, terrain, clean air, pleasant climate, gentle topography, natural drainage, strategic location offering clear views of lower valley towns, natural defence, and distance from indigenous populations were significant considerations for the British in selecting these locations.

## Conclusion

The establishment of cantonments in Himachal Pradesh during the British colonial period was driven by strategic, administrative, and climatic considerations. These military settlements served as key outposts to secure the frontier, consolidate political power, and provide a healthier environment for British troops and officials. Despite the displacement of local populations and environmental impact, these cantonments played a significant role in shaping the urban landscape of the region. Their planned development, characterized by well-organized infrastructure and meticulous mapping, reflected British colonial power and confidence. However, the colonial urban settlements did not form a cohesive cluster and were scattered across the hills, emphasizing their strategic locations and isolation. The enduring significance of these cantonments underscores the enduring legacy of colonialism in Himachal Pradesh, with factors like scenic beauty, altitude, and strategic positioning contributing to their continued relevance.

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