

Urban Transformations: Colonial Legacies and the Modern Identity of Bangalore: A Historical Analysis

Dr. Mahesh Kumar D.H.

Assistant Professor, Department of History, University College of Arts,
Tumkur University, Tumkuru, Karnataka

DOI:10.37648/ijrssh.v15i04.010

¹ Received: 28/09/2025; Accepted: 30/10/2025 Published: 18/11/2025

Abstract

This study explores the enduring impact of colonial urban planning, administration, and socio-cultural influences on the contemporary identity of Bangalore, a city that today stands as a symbol of India's technological and economic growth. This study focuses on the period of colonial rule, particularly following the establishment of the Bangalore Cantonment in 1809. The colonial rule introduced a dual-city model, segregating the indigenous 'Pete' from the newly established Cantonment area, each governed by distinct infrastructural priorities and urban aesthetics. Through historical analysis, archival mapping, and spatial comparison, the article highlights how colonial-era interventions laid the groundwork for persistent spatial inequalities, civic institutions, and patterns of land use that continue to shape Bangalore's urban fabric. The research study has two objectives: 1) to study the urban transformations in Bangalore during the pre-colonial and post-colonial periods, and 2) to analyze the impact of colonial legacies on the urban form and development of modern Bangalore. The study found that colonial rule significantly influenced multiple aspects of Bangalore's development, including infrastructure and public health, administrative structures and governance, socio-cultural dynamics, and environmental conditions.

Keywords: *Colonial Periods; Identity; Modern Bangalore; Urban Structure; Urban Transformations.*

1. Introduction

Bangalore, known globally as a center for innovation and technology, possesses an urban identity deeply rooted in its colonial past. While the urban transformation into a leading metropolis is often framed in the context of post-liberalization economic growth, this narrative overlooks the foundational role played by British colonialism in shaping its urban form, governance structures, and spatial hierarchies. This paper seeks to address that gap by critically examining how colonial legacies continue to inform the built environment and socio-political dynamics of contemporary Bangalore. Before British intervention, Bangalore was a modest urban settlement under the rule of South Indian dynasties, including the Kempegowda lineage and later the Wodeyars of Mysore. However, with the establishment of the Bangalore Cantonment in 1809 as a military and administrative outpost of the British East India Company, the city underwent a radical transformation. The colonial administration introduced a dual-city framework, physically and administratively dividing the indigenous "pete" (market town) and the European-designed Cantonment. These zones differed not only in layout and infrastructure but also in governance, population demographics, and urban priorities. The British Cantonment was characterized by wide roads, bungalows, military barracks, and racially segregated neighborhoods, in stark contrast to the dense, organically grown Pete with its traditional markets and vernacular architecture. This spatial and cultural dichotomy laid the groundwork for long-standing patterns of urban

¹ **How to cite the article:** Mahesh K.D.H ; (November, 2025); Urban Transformations: Colonial Legacies and the Modern Identity of Bangalore: A Historical Analysis; *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*; Vol 15, Issue 4; 79-84, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.37648/ijrssh.v15i04.010>

inequality and fragmentation that persist today in the form of uneven infrastructure, disparate development zones, and complex municipal jurisdictions.

Through this study, Bangalore's present-day urban identity cannot be fully understood without examining the legacy of colonial urbanism. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines historical inquiry, spatial analysis, and urban theory, this research uncovers how British colonial policies continue to shape the city's physical and social landscape. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship on post-colonial urbanism, which seeks to interrogate the enduring structures of colonial power embedded within contemporary cities.

2. Research Objectives

- To study the urban transformations in Bangalore during the pre-colonial and post-colonial periods.
- To analyze the impact of colonial legacies on the urban form and development of modern Bangalore.

3. Materials And Methods

This study is entirely based on secondary sources and utilizes both descriptive and analytical methods. The secondary data was collected including epigraphic records, Wikipedia entries, as well as published and unpublished theses, academic journals, historical texts, and research papers relevant to the urban development of Bangalore.

4. Urban Transformations In Bangalore During The Pre-Colonial And Post-Colonial Periods

This study focuses on pre-colonial and post-colonial rule led to starkly different urban transformations in Bangalore, resulting in a 'dual city' that persists today. While the pre-colonial city was an indigenous administrative and trading center, the colonial era introduced a socially segregated, military-centric urban layout. Post-colonial developments increased urbanization through state-led and neo-liberal initiatives, transforming Bangalore into a global 'tech hub'.

Pre-Colonial Period

Before the advent of British influence, Bangalore functioned as a regional town with an urban fabric rooted in traditional socio-economic and spatial systems. The formal establishment of the city dates back to 1537, when Kempe Gowda-I, a chieftain under the Vijayanagara Empire, founded Bangalore by constructing a mud fort and implementing a planned layout. The urban plan followed a central grid pattern, with designated zones for various trades and occupations. Two principal streets—Chickpete and Doddapete—formed the spine of this layout and continue to serve as major commercial thoroughfares in the present day.

In terms of governance and economy, Bangalore experienced rule under successive regimes, including the Marathas, Mughals, and the Wodeyars of Mysore. The city's economy during this period was primarily agrarian, supported by regional trade networks and administered through localized governance structures. To accommodate a growing population and ensure water availability, Kempe Gowda-I commissioned the construction of numerous water tanks, or *keres*, which became vital to the city's water management system. Urban settlements were strategically established on elevated terrain to prevent flooding and promote healthier living conditions, reflecting early considerations of topography in planning.

Post-Colonial Period

After India's independence in 1947, Bangalore underwent a significant transformation driven by political reorganization, industrialization, and technological advancement. The post-colonial period marked a shift from colonial administrative planning to state-led urban development.

- Public Sector Industries:** As the capital of the newly formed state of Karnataka, Bangalore became a hub for public sector enterprises, especially in defense, aeronautics, and telecommunications. This catalyzed rapid urban expansion, migration, and infrastructural development. The establishment of institutions such as Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) contributed to

Bangalore's reputation as a center of scientific and technological innovation. Urban growth during this period was characterized by a combination of planned and unplanned expansion. New residential layouts emerged to accommodate the growing middle class, while informal settlements proliferated on the urban periphery due to increased rural-to-urban migration. Despite the formation of the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) in 1976 to guide planned growth, challenges related to urban sprawl, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-spatial inequality persisted.

- b. **Rise of the IT Industry:** By the late 20th century, the liberalization of India's economy in 1991 further accelerated Bangalore's transformation, laying the groundwork for its evolution into the 'Silicon Valley of India'. The city witnessed an IT boom that redefined its urban morphology, with new tech parks, gated communities, and globalized urban enclaves reshaping the landscape and deepening the divide between formal and informal urban development.
- c. **Socioeconomic Segregation:** Colonial planning established distinct areas for different communities, a pattern that persisted after independence. This legacy of segregation continues to influence the city's social and economic geography, with inequalities visible in different neighborhoods.
- d. **Marginalization of Local Industries:** British colonial economic policies weakened indigenous industries in the region. For instance, the local textile and pottery businesses collapsed due to competition from British-imported goods. This deindustrialization forced traditional artisans to find new livelihoods, and the economic fallout led to the rise of caste-based social welfare organizations.
- e. **Administrative System:** Post-colonial India retained much of the highly centralized British-style bureaucracy, designed for control rather than citizen welfare. For Bangalore, this meant that the administrative structure was not well-equipped to handle the immense population growth and urban sprawl that occurred in the later 20th century. Issues like bureaucratic inertia and delays in large-scale projects, such as the Namma Metro, can be linked to these inherited administrative shortcomings.
- f. **Architectural Fusion:** British-era buildings are a visible reminder of the colonial period, with landmarks such as Bangalore Palace showcasing colonial design. Contemporary urban designers in the city often try to blend colonial and ancient Dravidian architectural styles with modern designs to reflect the city's unique cultural identity.
- g. **Elite Cultural Preferences:** The colonial emphasis on English education and Western knowledge created a class of English-speaking elites. This has continued to influence cultural and social hierarchies in modern Bengaluru, where English proficiency and Western consumerism are often associated with upward mobility.

5. Impact of Colonial Legacies on Modern Bangalore

This study analyzes the profound impact of the colonial legacy on urban form and development of modern Bangalore, as reflected in the creation of a dual city, segmented infrastructure, and a new administrative framework. This legacy established the foundations for Bangalore's later emergence as an industrial and technological hub, and also embedded deep-seated spatial and socio-economic inequalities that persist to this day. This study analyzes the impact of colonial rule on modern Bangalore, focusing on the creation of a dual city, the development of infrastructure and public health systems, administrative structures and governance, and patterns of environmental degradation.

1. The Creation of the Dual City: The Cantonment and Pete: Before British rule, Bangalore was a regional town centered on a fort and the native Pete, a densely populated area characterized by markets and traditional settlements. The colonial period introduced a stark dual-city structure, with the establishment of the Cantonment, which profoundly influenced the city's subsequent urban and socio-cultural development.

Cantonment: The Bangalore Cantonment was established in 1809, following the Anglo-Mysore Wars, as part of the British colonial strategy to maintain military and administrative control over the region. The British created a "Civil and Military Station" in Bangalore, strategically located to keep European troops physically and socially distanced from the local population. This enclave was a self-contained entity, designed to cater to the needs and lifestyle of the British, Anglo-Indian communities, and Christian missionaries. Architecturally and spatially, the cantonment reflected the ethos of British urban design: wide, tree-lined avenues, spacious bungalows, and clearly demarcated zones for military, residential, and civic functions. These planning elements not only facilitated control and order but also

recreated a sense of familiarity for the colonial elite, mimicking the spatial organization of British towns. The legacy of the cantonment is still evident today. Many streets continue to bear colonial-era names, such as Brigade Road, Residency Road, and Infantry Road. The area remains a prominent center of cosmopolitan and English-speaking culture, reflecting its colonial past while integrating into the broader urban fabric of modern Bangalore.

Pete: The older, traditional city was known as the 'Pete' or market town, and was centered on Kempe Gowda's 16th-century foundation. It was home to the native Kannadiga population and was built with narrow, winding lanes. Under colonial rule, the Pete became a stark contrast to the planned Cantonment, representing the traditional, local way of life. The two entities operated as separate towns until their merger in 1949.

Persistent Divide: The stark division between the orderly, green Cantonment and the congested Pete persisted long after independence. Even today, former Cantonment areas have better infrastructure and higher property values, reflecting this inherited spatial inequality.

2. Infrastructure and Public Health: The colonial administration introduced modern infrastructure in Bangalore, but its development was inherently unequal, disproportionately favoring the Cantonment and deepening spatial and social disparities.

Water and Sanitation: Modern water supply and sewage systems were prioritized in the Cantonment to protect the British population from epidemics such as the plague, which had a devastating impact on the densely populated native Pete areas. The 1898 plague epidemic, in particular, acted as a catalyst for urban reforms, leading to more rigid sanitary divisions between the colonial and indigenous parts of the city.

Modern Amenities: The British introduced several modern amenities, including electric street lighting—making Bangalore one of the first cities in Asia to have electric streetlights by 1906. Additionally, the establishment of railway lines and telegraph networks significantly enhanced connectivity and communication, though these advancements were primarily intended to serve the strategic and economic interests of the colonial regime.

Racialized Improvement: Many public health and urban planning initiatives were framed as efforts toward "improvement," but they often masked racialized and exclusionary motives. Under the guise of disease prevention and sanitation, marginalized Indian communities were frequently displaced to low-lying, underdeveloped areas on the urban periphery. These policies reinforced segregation along lines of race, caste, and class—patterns that continued to shape the city's social geography well into the postcolonial period.

3. Administrative Structure and Governance: The colonial period laid the foundations for administrative structures that continue to shape Bangalore's governance and urban planning frameworks to this day.

Dual Administration: During colonial rule, Bangalore was governed through a bifurcated administrative system, with the Pete managed by the Mysore princely state and the Cantonment under direct British control. This dual system persisted until 1949, when the city and cantonment municipalities were formally merged. However, the legacy of fragmented governance continues to influence the city's institutional landscape.

Unelected Planning Bodies: Colonial governance prioritized centralized, top-down planning through unelected parastatal agencies, sidelining elected municipal bodies. This institutional structure continued into the post-colonial period, resulting in a persistent disconnect between planning authorities and local democratic institutions. The lack of participatory mechanisms has often undermined accountability and responsiveness in urban development.

Enforcement Challenges: The colonial model also established a precedent for weak enforcement of planning regulations. Urban planning laws were often poorly implemented, and this trend has endured. Contemporary challenges—including inadequate public engagement, routine legalization of planning violations, and institutional overlaps can be traced back to colonial-era governance norms and administrative inertia.

4. Socio-Cultural Shifts: Colonial rule catalyzed profound societal transformations in Bangalore, many of which continue to shape the city's contemporary urban identity and social fabric. Colonial rule is a significant societal change

that continues to define the character of modern Bangalore. The British presence introduced new administrative structures, educational institutions, religious missions, and urban lifestyles that altered the traditional social order. English emerged as a dominant language, facilitating the rise of a Western-educated middle class and contributing to Bangalore's identity as a hub of cosmopolitanism. The establishment of missionary schools, churches, clubs, and hospitals in the cantonment area played a crucial role in reshaping local cultural and social dynamics. New ideas of modernity, public hygiene, dress, and conduct filtered into local society, particularly among those who lived or worked in proximity to colonial institutions. These transformations also reinforced class and racial divisions—with stark contrasts between the native city (Pete area) and the colonial cantonment in terms of infrastructure, services, and lifestyles. Over time, however, these influences blended with local traditions, producing a unique hybrid culture that remains visible in Bangalore's linguistic diversity, educational prominence, and social ethos today.

4. Environmental Degradation: The environmental trajectory of Bangalore has been significantly shaped by colonial-era planning and land management practices, which have had lasting ecological consequences.

Environmental Strain: The colonial shift toward urban expansion and infrastructure development placed growing strain on Bangalore's natural ecosystems. Once sustained through traditional practices, the city's network of interconnected lakes and green commons began to degrade due to neglect and encroachment. Under pre-colonial and early colonial regimes, these water bodies were more sustainably managed as part of local agrarian and ecological systems. Their deterioration has contributed directly to contemporary issues such as water scarcity, urban flooding, and declining biodiversity.

Resource Management: Colonial and early post-colonial land use policies prioritized administrative, military, and infrastructural needs over ecological and subsistence concerns. Agricultural lands and peri-urban commons—once vital for local food production and ecological balance—were often repurposed or devalued. This undermined local food systems and increased the city's dependence on external resources, while simultaneously disrupting traditional relationships with the environment.

6. Conclusion

The modern urban identity of Bangalore is deeply rooted in its colonial past. The British-era division between the Cantonment and the native Pete laid the foundation for a dual-city structure that continues to shape spatial, social, and economic inequalities. Colonial investments in infrastructure and public health, though modernizing in form, were unevenly distributed and designed to serve colonial interests—often at the expense of native populations. The administrative frameworks established during this period fostered centralized, non-participatory governance practices that persist in various forms today, weakening democratic urban planning. Additionally, colonial land use policies disrupted sustainable resource management systems, contributing to environmental degradation and long-term ecological imbalance. These legacies have not only endured but have also evolved, influencing Bangalore's contemporary challenges—from infrastructure disparities and governance gaps to environmental vulnerabilities. Understanding these historical trajectories is essential for reimagining more inclusive, equitable, and ecologically resilient urban futures. Addressing Bangalore's urban challenges thus requires not only technical solutions but also a critical engagement with its colonial past.

References

- Alex, S., Kollarath, R. M., & Jadhav, U. K. (2024). Urban resilience of historic neighbourhoods in the context of Bengaluru City. In *Future is Urban* (pp. 322–331). Routledge.
- Chacko, E., & Varghese, P. (2009). Identity and representations of gated communities in Bangalore, India. *Open House International*, 34(3), 57–64.
- D'Cruz, E. (2025). Urban agriculture and urban planning: A case of Bangalore between the 1950s and the 1970s. *Landscape Research*, 50(5), 802–812.

Embleton, S. (2023). Names in India: History, colonialism, renaming, contemporary issues. In *Onomastics in interaction with other branches of science. Proceedings of the 27th International Congress of Onomastic Sciences* (Vol. 1, pp. 3–26).

Menon, D. M. (2002). Religion and colonial modernity: Rethinking belief and identity. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(17), 1662–1667.

Milanetti, G. (2015). Between enduring urban models and shifting cultural trajectories: Unravelling narratives on Ayodhyā and Bengaluru. *Cracow Indological Studies*, 17, 19–28.

Nair, J. (2002). Past perfect: Architecture and public life in Bangalore. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 61(4), 1205–1236. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3096439>

Ranganathan, M. (2018). Rule by difference: Empire, liberalism, and the legacies of urban “improvement”. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 50(7), 1386–1406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X18785914>

Unnikrishnan, H., B. M., Nagendra, H., & Castán Broto, V. (2021). Water governance and the colonial urban project: The Dharmambudhi lake in Bengaluru, India. *Urban Geography*, 42(3), 263–288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2020.1712184>