

The Colonial Roots of Modern Bangalore: A Study of British Influence on Commerce

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ABSTRACT:

Modern Bangalore, now known as Bengaluru, stands as India's leading commercial and technological hub. However, its transformation from a small cantonment town to a vibrant economic center was deeply rooted in its colonial past. The British influence on Bangalore's commercial structure, urban planning, and institutional development fundamentally reshaped its socio-economic landscape. This paper explores the evolution of commerce in Bangalore under British rule, focusing on how colonial policies, infrastructural expansion, and trade networks laid the foundation for the city's modern economy. Drawing upon historical archives, government records, and existing scholarship, the study examines how the British cantonment became the nucleus of urban and economic development. The paper concludes that colonial-era economic reforms, though exploitative in intent, inadvertently laid the groundwork for Bangalore's later industrial and technological growth.

KEYWORDS:

Colonial legacy, British rule, Bangalore, commerce, trade networks, urban economy, modernization.

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1. Introduction:

Bangalore, today called Bengaluru, is often hailed as the "Silicon Valley of India." Its image as a global information technology (IT) powerhouse often overshadows the historical layers beneath its modern façade. The city's urban and commercial transformation began not in the post-independence era but during the period of British colonial rule in the nineteenth century.

The colonial administration's establishment of the British Cantonment in 1809 initiated new patterns of trade, migration, and urbanization. Bangalore's commercial evolution was intricately linked to British military, administrative, and infrastructural initiatives. The city became a strategic site for the East India Company's southern operations and later for the Crown's direct rule.

This paper attempts to trace the colonial roots of modern Bangalore's

commerce, focusing on how British interventions in trade, transport, education, and administration shaped the city's commercial identity. The study also highlights how local traders, artisans, and communities adapted to – and were transformed by – these colonial economic structures.

2. Historical Background:

Before British occupation, Bangalore was part of the Mysore Kingdom, ruled successively by the Wodeyars, Hyder Ali, and Tipu Sultan. Under Tipu Sultan, Bangalore had already gained prominence for its textile and sericulture industries. However, after Tipu's defeat in 1799 at the Battle of Srirangapatna, the British East India Company divided Mysore, keeping the strategic Bangalore area under direct control.

In 1809, the British established the Cantonment of Bangalore, marking the beginning of dual administration: the "Pettah" under the Mysore ruler and the "Cantonment" under the British. This bifurcation created distinct urban cultures and commercial ecosystems. While the Pettah remained traditional with local bazaars and native merchants, the Cantonment evolved into a modern commercial center with European-style shops, clubs, and markets.

The introduction of railways in 1864, connecting Bangalore to Madras (Chennai), further strengthened its position as a trade and administrative hub. The railway not only facilitated troop movements but also stimulated the movement of goods, capital, and labor – vital ingredients for modern commerce.

3. Literature Review:

Scholars have examined Bangalore's colonial development through various lenses. Janaki Nair (2005) emphasizes the dual character of the colonial city – where indigenous and colonial economies coexisted yet remained segregated. She notes that the British Cantonment introduced capitalist forms of commerce and consumer culture.

Harini Nagendra (2016) explores the environmental and spatial transformation of Bangalore, highlighting how British-era infrastructure like roads, lakes, and parks facilitated trade and settlement. Similarly, S. Chandrasekhar (1983) links British policies in Mysore to the introduction of modern banking, postal systems, and markets.

David Washbrook (1976) and Christopher Bayly (1988) discuss the broader framework of colonial capitalism, showing how the British introduced monetization and property rights to integrate Indian regions into a global capitalist economy. Applying their theories to Bangalore reveals how the city's commercial modernity was an outcome of both imperial interests and local entrepreneurial adaptation.

However, limited research focuses exclusively on Bangalore's commercial evolution under the British. This paper fills that gap by analyzing how the colonial economy directly influenced the city's growth as a trade and industrial center.

4. Methodology:

This research follows a historical-analytical method, relying on secondary sources such as archival documents, government reports, gazetteers, and prior academic studies. The study also includes interpretive analysis of urban records and trade data from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Qualitative data, including travelers' accounts and official correspondences, have been used to reconstruct the commercial landscape of colonial Bangalore.

5. British Commercial Policies in Bangalore:

5.1 Establishment of the Cantonment Economy

The establishment of the Cantonment created a parallel commercial zone that operated differently from the native Pettah. British officers and soldiers brought new patterns of consumption – demand for imported goods, uniforms, and luxury items – leading to the emergence of new trading communities. Tamil, Anglo-Indian, and European merchants set up shops along Brigade Road, Commercial Street, and MG Road, creating what was perhaps the earliest organized retail district in southern India.

5.2 Introduction of Modern Markets and Infrastructure

To support the growing population, the British introduced structured markets such as the Russell Market (constructed in the 1920s) and modern sanitation and lighting systems. These markets were regulated by municipal authorities – marking the beginning of civic commercial regulation. The British also developed Bangalore Municipality (1862) and the Cantonment Board, both of which laid the groundwork for urban governance and taxation that later supported citywide trade.

5.3 Railway and Communication Networks

The Bangalore-Madras railway line (1864) was transformative. It enabled the export of agricultural produce, silk, and textiles while facilitating import of machinery and manufactured goods. Later extensions connected Bangalore to Mysore, Hubli, and Bombay, integrating it into the British imperial trade grid. The telegraph and postal services established in the 1860s-70s also accelerated commercial correspondence and financial transactions.

5.4 Emergence of Banking and Finance

Colonial-era banks such as Bank of Madras and Imperial Bank of India opened branches in Bangalore, supporting military pay accounts,

business transactions, and remittances. Indigenous moneylenders and chettians adapted by aligning their systems with colonial banking norms, merging traditional credit networks with formal financial institutions. These changes introduced the concept of modern banking to local traders.

6. Transformation of Local Trade and Industry:

6. 1 Indigenous Enterprise under Colonial Rule

Local artisans, weavers, and merchants played a vital role in the Cantonment economy. The British encouraged certain industries, such as silk weaving, coffee trade, and tanneries, which supplied raw materials for export to England. Bangalore's silk industry, revived under British patronage, became a key economic driver, eventually paving the way for the post-independence sericulture sector.

6. 2 Migration and Labour Market

The city's new economic opportunities attracted migrants from Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and northern Karnataka. This multiethnic workforce contributed to the development of labor markets and service sectors. Anglo-Indians and Eurasians found employment in clerical and railway services, while Indian merchants formed guilds and associations that managed local trade.

6. 3 Urban Commercial Geography

Colonial urban planning divided Bangalore into two distinct zones – the Pettah (native town) and the Cantonment (European town). The Pettah remained a hub for traditional trades such as goldsmithing, textiles, and spices, whereas the Cantonment developed modern businesses, hotels, and bakeries catering to European tastes. This spatial division influenced class and community-based commercial identities that persist today in areas like Shivajinagar, Chickpet, and Brigade Road.

7. British Legacy and Modern Bangalore's Commercial Identity:

The economic structures established during British rule created the foundation for post-independence industrialization. The introduction of English education and technical training during the colonial period led to the creation of a skilled workforce that later powered Bangalore's industrial and technological growth.

In the early 20th century, industries like Binny Mills, Bharat Earth Movers, and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) drew upon the infrastructure and administrative frameworks established under British rule. The grid-based layout of the Cantonment, the drainage systems, and road networks became the backbone of modern Bengaluru's urban planning.

Even the post-1990s IT revolution – which transformed Bangalore

into India's global business center – can be traced to the colonial tradition of integrating trade, education, and infrastructure. The British inadvertently sowed the seeds of modernization by introducing capitalist markets and civic systems that encouraged entrepreneurship.

8. Analysis and Discussion:

The British influence on Bangalore's commerce was dual-edged. On one hand, it exploited local resources, disrupted traditional industries, and prioritized imperial interests. On the other, it introduced modernization – in infrastructure, communication, and education – that became essential for the city's later prosperity.

From a historical-economic perspective, Bangalore exemplifies the "colonial paradox": the same systems that extracted wealth from India also laid the groundwork for its later capitalist growth. British administrative efficiency, documentation practices, and town planning made Bangalore a model colonial city.

The long-term impact of these policies can be seen in:

- The continuity of commercial zones (e. g., Commercial Street, Chickpet)
- The institutionalization of trade regulation and taxation
- The introduction of modern credit and transport systems
- The cosmopolitan commercial culture that defined Bangalore's urban ethos

Thus, while the British intended to serve imperial goals, their policies indirectly empowered Bangalore to evolve into one of India's most modern and commercially dynamic cities.

9. Conclusion:

The story of Bangalore's commercial rise cannot be told without acknowledging its colonial roots. The British transformed Bangalore from a regional town into a modern urban center by introducing infrastructural networks, market systems, and administrative reforms. While their motives were primarily strategic and exploitative, the long-term consequences of their rule were the modernization of commerce and the diversification of the urban economy.

The colonial commercial foundation of Bangalore provided a resilient framework upon which post-independence industries and modern businesses thrived. The city's unique blend of traditional markets and global enterprises mirrors its historical evolution from a colonial cantonment to a cosmopolitan metropolis.

Future research may focus on quantitative trade data, oral histories of trading families, and the evolution of specific industries like textiles,

coffee, and information technology – all of which owe their origins to the British commercial legacy.

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