

Army for Civilian Duties

What is the issue?

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- Following the tragic incident at Elphinstone Bridge, it was announced that army engineers would be used to construct three railway footbridges in Mumbai.

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- The practice of diversion of the armed forces for routine civilian tasks has some long-term costs for the government.

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What is the deviation from the usual norm?

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- This is not the first time the army has been used for civilian tasks.

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- The army engineers had made temporary structures (pontoon bridges) during the Kumbh mela and other such large public gatherings.

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- They had been employed to restore communication in inaccessible areas after natural disasters.

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- However, the case with Mumbai at present is different.

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- Notably, it is not a remote area where civilian agencies are unavailable.

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- Considerably, the Railways in Mumbai have enough engineering resources, technical expertise, funds and experience in constructing such a bridge.

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- Even private infrastructure creation agencies are available in Mumbai.

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- Also, unlike the temporary bridges made during public gatherings, the proposed ones are permanent infrastructures.

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- Given the significant deviations from the norm, a democratic government

still considers it right to employ soldiers in the manner it deems fit.

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Why is it not advisable?

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- The practice essentially violates a fundamental principle of a modern military that during peace-time, it must be left free to prepare for war.

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- **Civilian Institutions** - The government must realise the institutional dangers inherent in employing soldiers in non-emergency civilian duties.

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- Such employment is an acknowledgement of the civilian institutional failure to the larger public.

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- Relying on this alternative, consequently, prevents considering the ultimate need for the assessment of shortfalls in civilian institutions.

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- **Substitute** - It holds potential negative consequences for the delicate balance of civil-military relations, if extended to other spheres of governance.

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- It reinforces the belief that the army can provide an effective substitute.

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- A recent survey shows that 53% of Indians believe that military rule would be a good thing; with more younger people supporting this idea.

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- This attitude among the civilian population has long-term costs for the stability of the country.

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- **E.g.** In 1953, following the riots against Ahmadiyyas, martial law was imposed in Lahore.

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- After bringing the law and order situation under control, the Pakistan army proceeded to launch the "Cleaner Lahore Campaign".

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- This initiative created a trust on army's efficiency among the public and this ultimately reinforced army's ability to restore a situation caused by the failure of civil administration.

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Source: Indian Express

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