



## 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.
- 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.
- The army engineers had made temporary structures (pontoon bridges) during the Kumbh mela and other such large public gatherings.
- They had been employed to restore communication in inaccessible areas after natural disasters.
- However, the case with Mumbai at present is different.
- Notably, it is not a remote area where civilian agencies are unavailable.
- Considerably, the Railways in Mumbai have enough engineering resources, technical expertise, funds and experience in constructing such a bridge.
- 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.
- 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.
- **Civilian Institutions** - The government must realise the institutional dangers inherent in employing soldiers in non-emergency civilian duties.
- Such employment is an acknowledgement of the civilian institutional failure to the larger public.
- Relying on this alternative, consequently, prevents considering the ultimate need for the assessment of shortfalls in civilian institutions.
- **Substitute** - It holds potential negative consequences for the delicate balance of civil-military relations, if extended to other spheres of governance.
- It reinforces the belief that the army can provide an effective substitute.
- A recent survey shows that 53% of Indians believe that military rule would be a good thing; with more younger people supporting this idea.
- This attitude among the civilian population has long-term costs for the stability of the country.
- **E.g.** In 1953, following the riots against Ahmadiyyas, martial law was imposed in Lahore.
- After bringing the law and order situation under control, the Pakistan army proceeded to launch the "Cleaner Lahore Campaign".
- 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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