

What is the Corps of Engineers?

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In news– Lieutenant General Manoj Pande has been appointed as the next chief of the Indian Army (COAS). Lt Gen Pande will be the first officer from the Corps of Engineers (The Bombay Sappers) to be named as the COAS.

About Corps of Engineers-

- The Indian Army's Corps of Engineers is **one of the oldest arms of the Indian Army.**
- It is bestowed with the **task of providing combat engineering support, developing infrastructure for armed forces** and other defence organisations.
- It is also **responsible for maintaining connectivity along the borders**, besides helping the civil authorities during natural disasters and calamities.
- **College of Military Engineering (CME) in Pune is the premier technical and tactical training institution** of the Indian Army Corps of Engineers.
- **The Corps of Engineers in the Indian Army traces its origins to 1780 when two regular pioneer companies of the Madras Sappers were raised.**
- The **term Sapper is used to denote all those persons who serve in the Corps of Engineers.**
- Originally, Sappers dug 'saps' or trenches to undermine the walls of fortifications during the era of siege warfare and the name has remained with the troops of the Corps of Engineers ever since.
- **The British later raised three separate 'Groups' of Sappers in each of the three Presidencies. Thus, the Madras, Bengal, and Bombay Sappers were raised.**

- Today, the home of the Madras Sappers is in Bengaluru, that of the Bengal Sappers is in Roorkee, and that of the Bombay Sappers in Pune. They are known as the Madras Engineer Group, Bengal Engineer Group, and Bombay Engineer Group respectively.
- In 1932, the three Groups were merged to form the Corps of Engineers in the present form.
- It is pertinent to mention that until 1911, the Corps of Engineers also performed the duty of providing communication links to the Army.
- Following the raising of the Corps of Signals in 1911, this responsibility was taken up by the Signallers.
- Many officers from the Corps of Engineers have risen to be Corps Commanders, Army Commanders and Vice Chief of Army Staff after being selected in General Cadre, but due to the twin criteria of age and seniority, not many were in the line for a shot at the top office.
- At present, apart from Lt Gen Manoj Pande, another officer from the Corps of Engineers, Lt Gen Yogendra Dimri, is GOC-in-C of the Army's Central Command.
- By comparison, fewer officers from Signals and other supporting arms opt or are selected for General Cadre.
- Only a handful of Signals officers have made it to Corps Commander level or GOC-in-C of a Command, and it was only in November 2021 that Lt Gen Nav K Khanduri became the first Army Air Defence officer to be appointed GOC-in-C of a Command.

What is special about this move?

- Army Chiefs in India have always been from either the Infantry, Armoured Corps, or Artillery. The Army's system of Corps and Regiments is divided into two broad categories: Arms and Services.
- Infantry, Armoured Corps, Artillery, Engineers, Signals, Army Air Defence, Army Aviation Corps, and Military

Intelligence fall under the **category of 'Arms'**.

- Army Service Corps, Army Ordnance Corps, Corps of Electronics and Mechanical Engineering, and several other minor Corps are in the **category of 'Services'**.
- It is widely acknowledged that any officer who rises to the level of Army Commander (GOC-in-C) is considered to have the capability of leading the Army regardless of which 'Arm' he is from.
- However, since fewer officers from supporting 'Arms' like the Corps of Engineers either opt or are selected for General Cadre at the rank of Brigadier compared to Infantry, Armoured Corps and Artillery, it follows that more officers from these three 'Arms' have risen to become Army Chief.
- **The appointment of an Engineers Officer as Army Chief is as significant as the appointment of Air Chief Marshal Fali Homi Major, a helicopter pilot, as Chief of the Air Staff in 2007.** Until then, the Air Chief had invariably been a fighter pilot.
- **Such appointments break a glass ceiling for the respective Arms and branches in the military, and re-emphasise the maxim that at the level of Army Commanders** there are no restrictions on supporting 'Arms' officers from reaching the apex office.

Operational role of the Corps of Engineers-

- It **performs a variety of tasks in war and peace**, which are spread across several spheres of operations.
- The Corps **consists of four major constituents:** Combat Engineers, Military Engineer Services (MES), Border Roads Organisation (BR0), and Military Survey to a limited extent.
- **Combat Engineers are deployed in war time**, and perform several crucial tasks.
- The assault engineer regiments with the strike formations of the Army have special equipment that

enable them **to lay bridges across water bodies, lay and clear minefields, construct tracks and helipads, and demolish bridges** if required.

- Modern warfare is very mobile and requires the quick movement of forces, and the **Engineers play a vital role in ensuring that no impediments delay the march.**
- Conversely, the **Engineers play a role in delaying the advance of the enemy by putting obstacles in their path** by blowing up roads, culverts, and bridges, and laying anti-tank and anti-personnel mines.
- The Engineers have played crucial roles in all wars that the country has fought. **In the Kargil conflict of 1999, many Engineer Regiments were awarded Chief of Army Staff Unit Citations,** and also Theatre Honour.
- The Engineer Regiments **also serve in UN Peacekeeping Operations, and are involved in humanitarian relief missions during earthquakes, floods, or accidents.**
- The MES takes care of the infrastructure requirements of the three services and allied defence organisations, while the BRO plays the vital role of constructing roads and bridges in the border areas.