



Government of India Act 1919 Features, Failures

Description

The Government of India Act 1919, also known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, marked a significant, albeit controversial, chapter in India's constitutional history. Enacted against the backdrop of growing nationalist demands and India's contributions to World War I, the Act aimed at gradually introducing self-governing institutions. While it presented some administrative reforms, its implementation and inherent limitations ultimately led to widespread dissatisfaction among [Indian political leaders](#).

The Act sought to address the increasing aspirations for political participation among Indians by introducing changes both at the provincial and central levels. However, the extent of these changes and the real transfer of power remained highly debated, with many nationalist leaders viewing them as inadequate and a mere eyewash. Understanding both its structural provisions and the reasons behind its ultimate rejection is crucial for comprehending the trajectory of India's independence movement.

This legislative measure was the direct outcome of the Montagu Declaration of August 1917, which promised "the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire." The Act of 1919 was the first major step towards fulfilling this promise, introducing a unique dual system of governance at the provincial level.

Introduction to Government of India Act 1919

The Government of India Act 1919 was a constitutional reform introduced by the British Parliament to expand the participation of Indians in the administration of their country. It derived its name from Edwin Montagu, the [Secretary of State for India](#), and Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy of India, who presented the detailed reform proposals. The primary objective was to gradually move India towards responsible government, meaning a system where the government is accountable to an elected legislative body.

The Act attempted to decentralize authority by devolving some powers to the provinces. However, this devolution was partial and subject to significant British control. It introduced a bicameral legislature at

the centre and a novel system known as Dyarchy in the provinces. While it represented an important constitutional milestone, it largely failed to meet the aspirations of Indian leaders for genuine self-rule, leading to its eventual denunciation by most political factions. The reforms were widely seen as too slow and limited in scope.

Dyarchy System in Provincial Governments

The most significant and distinctive feature of the Government of India Act 1919 was the introduction of the 'Dyarchy' (or 'Diarchy') system in the provinces. This term, derived from Greek, means 'dual rule'. Under this system, provincial subjects were divided into two categories: 'Reserved' and 'Transferred'.

Reserved Subjects

These subjects were considered crucial for the maintenance of British authority and were kept under the direct control of the Governor and his Executive Council. The members of the Executive Council were appointed by the British government and were not responsible to the provincial legislative council. Examples of reserved subjects included:

- **Finance:** Crucial for funding all administrative activities.
- **Law and Order:** Maintaining peace and security, including policing and justice.
- **Land Revenue:** A primary source of government income.
- **Irrigation:** Essential for agricultural productivity and revenue.
- **Famines Relief:** Management of emergency situations.

The Governor had complete control over these departments and could override the decisions of the Executive Council if he deemed it necessary. The administrators of reserved subjects were accountable only to the Governor-General and the Secretary of State for India, not to the elected representatives.

Transferred Subjects

These subjects were placed under the administration of the Governor acting with ministers chosen from among the elected members of the provincial legislative council. These ministers were, in theory, responsible to the legislative council. Examples of transferred subjects included:

- **Local Self-Government:** Municipalities and district boards.
- **Public Health and Sanitation:** Healthcare services.
- **Education:** Primary, secondary, and higher education.
- **Public Works:** Roads, buildings, and infrastructure.
- **Agriculture:** Farming and related activities.
- **Industries:** Development and regulation of industries.

While ministers were responsible for transferred subjects, their real power was severely limited. The Governor retained significant discretionary powers, including the right to assent to or veto legislation, and to dismiss ministers. Furthermore, the financial resources for transferred subjects were largely controlled by the reserved half of the government, often leading to a shortage of funds for development.

work overseen by Indian ministers. This point needs attention: Ministers, though “responsible”, often lacked the actual means to implement policies effectively, creating an inherent weakness in the system.

Central Government Structure under the 1919 Act

The changes introduced at the central government level by the Government of India Act 1919 were less substantial than those at the provincial level, maintaining a strong imperial grip. There was no introduction of responsible government at the centre, and the executive remained powerful and largely unaccountable to the legislature.

Executive

The executive authority at the centre continued to vest in the Governor-General (Viceroy) and his Executive Council. The Act stipulated that at least three of the eight members of the Governor-General’s Executive Council must be Indians. However, the Governor-General retained extensive powers. He could override his Council’s decisions, veto legislation passed by the central legislature, and issue ordinances in emergencies, which had the force of law. He was also directly responsible to the British Parliament through the Secretary of State for India. No responsible government was introduced at the centre. This meant that the central executive was not answerable to the elected members of the legislature, thereby keeping real power concentrated in British hands.

Legislature

For the first time, a bicameral (two-house) legislature was introduced at the centre, replacing the Imperial Legislative Council. This included the Council of State and the Legislative Assembly.

- **Council of State (Upper House):** This body had 60 members, of whom 34 were elected and the rest nominated. It was intended to be a more conservative body with a longer tenure (five years). Its powers were generally similar to those of the Legislative Assembly, but it had a significant role in approving financial proposals.
- **Legislative Assembly (Lower House):** This was the larger house, consisting of 145 members. Of these, 104 were elected, and 41 were nominated (26 official, 15 non-official). Its tenure was three years. The Legislative Assembly had powers to pass laws, discuss the budget (though it could not vote on all demands), ask questions, and move resolutions. However, its powers were limited. The Governor-General could veto any bill passed by the legislature, and even “certify” a bill as passed if the legislature rejected it, effectively bypassing their will.

The franchise for electing members to both houses of the central legislature was very restricted. It was based on high property qualifications, tax payments, or educational achievements. This meant only a small percentage of the Indian population (around 1.5% to 2%) had the right to vote. The principle of communal representation, which had been introduced with the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, was further extended. Separate electorates were provided for Muslims, Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-

Indians, and Europeans, institutionalizing divisions within the electorate.

Unitary and Centralised Nature of the Government

Despite the apparent devolution of powers to the provinces under Dyarchy, the overall structure of the Government of India established by the 1919 Act remained fundamentally unitary and centralized. The reforms did not truly introduce federalism or provincial autonomy in its modern sense.

The Governor-General in Council retained extensive control over the provinces. The Governor-General had the authority to sanction provincial legislation, issue directives to provincial governments, and could intervene in provincial administration. The financial system also reflected this centralization. Although provinces were granted certain sources of revenue, the central government maintained significant control over provincial finances. The major and most lucrative sources of revenue, such as salt tax, customs duties, and income tax, remained with the centre. Provinces were often dependent on central grants and loans, limiting their financial independence and capacity to implement policies for transferred subjects.

Furthermore, the Secretary of State for India and the British Parliament in London continued to hold ultimate authority over Indian affairs. The Governor-General was accountable to the Secretary of State, who, in turn, was accountable to the British Parliament. This meant that the final decision-making power for critical aspects of [Indian governance](#) still lay outside India, reinforcing the unitary character of the British Indian administration. At this stage, one issue becomes clear: the reforms were designed to introduce limited self-governance without truly relinquishing British control.

Reasons for the Failure of Government of India Act 1919

The Government of India Act 1919, despite being a significant constitutional reform, largely failed to achieve its stated objective of satisfying Indian political aspirations and gradually moving towards responsible government. Its inherent flaws and limitations led to widespread discontent.

Flaws in Dyarchy

The Dyarchy system itself was fundamentally flawed and proved unworkable in practice.

- **Artificial Division of Subjects:** The division of subjects into 'reserved' and 'transferred' was often arbitrary and illogical. For instance, irrigation was a reserved subject, while agriculture, which heavily depended on irrigation, was transferred. This artificial separation created constant friction and made effective administration difficult.
- **Lack of Financial Control for Ministers:** Ministers responsible for transferred subjects had little to no control over finances, which were a reserved subject. They often struggled to find funds for their departments, leading to frustration and an inability to implement welfare policies effectively.
- **Governor's Overriding Powers:** The Governor retained extensive discretionary powers, including the power to overrule his ministers, certify bills, and even take control of transferred departments in emergencies. This severely undermined the concept of ministerial responsibility and accountability to the legislature.

- **No Collective Responsibility:** Ministers were individually responsible to the legislative council, but there was no concept of collective responsibility. This prevented the formation of a strong, unified cabinet and often led to disunity and a lack of common purpose.
- **Frequent Interference by Governors:** Governors often interfered in the working of transferred departments, sometimes acting as heads of departments rather than constitutional heads, further limiting the ministers' autonomy.

Limited Franchise

The electoral system was highly restrictive. Only a minuscule proportion of the Indian population (around 1.5% to 2% of the adult population) was enfranchised due to high property, income, and educational qualifications. This meant that the legislative councils did not truly represent the vast majority of the Indian people, diminishing their legitimacy and democratic character.

Communal Electorates

The continuation and extension of communal electorates, providing separate constituencies for various religious and ethnic groups, further solidified and institutionalized divisions within the Indian body politic. This policy was criticized for encouraging communal politics and hindering the development of a unified national identity.

Central Government Irresponsibility

No responsible government was introduced at the centre. The Governor-General and his Executive Council remained fully accountable to the British Parliament, not to the elected Indian legislature. This meant that critical areas of governance, including defence, foreign affairs, and finance, remained entirely outside Indian control, severely limiting the scope of self-governance.

Unsatisfactory to Indian Aspirations

The Act was widely perceived by Indian nationalist leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, as 'unsatisfactory and disappointing'. It fell far short of the demands for 'Swaraj' (self-rule) and [dominion status](#). The reforms were seen as too slow, too cautious, and designed to perpetuate British rule rather than genuinely transfer power. The Amritsar Massacre of 1919, occurring shortly after the Act's passage, further soured Indian public opinion and intensified demands for complete independence. This point needs attention: The political climate of the time, marked by intense nationalism, made these limited reforms seem inadequate and even insulting.

UPSC Perspective

Prelims Focus

- **Key Features:** Dyarchy (division of subjects into reserved and transferred), Bicameral legislature at the Centre (Council of State and Legislative Assembly), Provincial Legislative Councils with increased elected members.

- **Important Personalities:** Montagu (Secretary of State for India), Chelmsford (Viceroy of India).
- **Electoral System:** Limited franchise, extension of communal electorates (Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans).
- **Executive:** Governor-General with overriding powers, inclusion of 3 Indians in Executive Council.
- **Powers of Governor:** Extensive discretionary and overriding powers at provincial level.

Mains Focus

- **Critical Analysis of Dyarchy:** Discuss the reasons for its failure (artificial division, financial control issues, Governor's powers, lack of collective responsibility).
- **Constitutional Significance:** Evaluate the Act as a step towards or away from responsible government, its role in India's constitutional evolution.
- **Comparison:** Contrast with the Morley-Minto Reforms (1909) and the [Government of India Act 1935](#).
- **Impact on Nationalist Movement:** How the Act fueled discontent, strengthened demands for complete independence, and contributed to the non-cooperation movement.
- **Centralisation vs. Decentralisation:** Analyze how, despite provincial reforms, the overall structure remained unitary and centralised.
- **Limitations of Reforms:** Explain why the Act failed to meet Indian aspirations for self-government.

Common Student Confusion

Misunderstanding: Many students mistakenly believe that the Government of India Act 1919 introduced complete provincial autonomy or a genuine transfer of power to Indian ministers at the provincial level. They might think 'Dyarchy' implied that ministers had substantial control over their departments, akin to modern cabinet government.

Correction: Dyarchy was not a system of complete provincial autonomy or genuine transfer of power. It was a partial and experimental division where crucial subjects (reserved) remained firmly under British control through the Governor and his Executive Council. While Indian ministers were responsible for 'transferred' subjects, their authority was severely constrained by the Governor's overriding powers, lack of financial control, and the artificial division of departments. Real power, particularly financial and law and order, remained with the British. The ministers were responsible without having adequate authority or resources, making the system largely ineffective and a source of frustration.

Short Revision Points

- **Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms:** Name of the Act.
- **Dyarchy:** Dual rule in provinces (Reserved and Transferred subjects).
- **Reserved Subjects:** Governor + Executive Council (e.g., Finance, Law & Order).
- **Transferred Subjects:** Governor + Ministers from elected council (e.g., Education, Health).
- **Central Legislature:** Bicameral (Council of State and Legislative Assembly).
- **Governor-General:** Retained overriding powers at centre.
- **Franchise:** Very limited (1.5-2% population).

- **Communal Electorates:** Extended to more groups.
- **Failures:** Flawed Dyarchy, limited franchise, no responsible government at centre, failed to meet Indian demands.
- **Outcome:** Increased nationalist agitation, led to Non-Cooperation Movement.

FAQs

1. What was Dyarchy under the Government of India Act 1919?

Dyarchy was a system of dual rule introduced in British Indian provinces, dividing provincial subjects into two categories: 'Reserved' (administered by Governor and Executive Council, not responsible to legislature) and 'Transferred' (administered by Governor with ministers chosen from elected members, theoretically responsible to legislature).

2. What were the key features of the Central Legislature in 1919?

The central legislature became bicameral, consisting of the Council of State (upper house) and the Legislative Assembly (lower house). Both had a majority of elected members, but their powers were limited, and the Governor-General retained extensive veto and ordinance-making authority.

3. Why did the 1919 Act not meet Indian demands for self-government?

The Act failed because Dyarchy was inherently flawed and unworkable, real power (especially financial control and law & order) remained with the British, the central government lacked responsible government, the franchise was extremely limited, and communal electorates perpetuated divisions. Indian nationalist leaders found the reforms too meager and slow to fulfill their aspirations for genuine self-rule.

The Government of India Act 1919, while a constitutional landmark, ultimately failed to provide a satisfactory framework for India's political future. Its features, particularly Dyarchy, were riddled with limitations that undermined the very concept of responsible government it claimed to introduce. This failure intensified the nationalist movement and paved the way for more comprehensive demands for self-rule. For those preparing for the [UPSC Civil Services](#) Examination, a deep understanding of the features and failures of the 1919 Act is indispensable. For comprehensive guidance on such crucial historical topics and to develop a strong foundational understanding, [SHRI RAM IAS](#) is widely regarded as the best [IAS coaching in Delhi](#).