



List of Governor General of British India for UPSC

Description

The administration of [British India](#) saw a complex evolution of its highest executive office, reflecting the changing nature of British power in the subcontinent. What began as a commercial venture under the [East India Company](#) gradually transformed into a full-fledged colonial empire, with the figurehead of the Governor-General at its helm. This position, later known as the Viceroy, was instrumental in implementing policies that profoundly shaped India's political, economic, and social landscape for nearly two centuries.

Understanding the progression of these administrative roles, the individuals who held them, and the significant policies enacted during their tenures is crucial for any serious student of [Indian history](#), particularly for the UPSC examination. The journey from the early days of the East India Company's territorial acquisitions to the direct rule of the British Crown, culminating in India's independence, is intrinsically linked to the actions and decisions of these key figures. Their legacy is a blend of administrative reforms, territorial expansion, socio-economic interventions, and, inevitably, the suppression of Indian aspirations.

Beginning of Governor General Post: Early British Administration

The seeds of centralized British administration in India were sown following the East India Company's increasing territorial control and administrative responsibilities, especially after the Battle of Buxar in 1764. The need for a unified command became evident to address the inconsistencies and corruption prevalent in the Company's presidencies of Bengal, Bombay, and Madras.

This led to the enactment of the Regulating Act of 1773, a landmark legislation by the British Parliament aimed at bringing the East India Company's administration in India under greater parliamentary control. A key provision of this Act was the creation of the post of Governor-General of the Presidency of Fort William in Bengal. This officer was to be assisted by a Council of Four members and was given supervisory authority over the presidencies of Bombay and Madras in matters of war and peace. [Warren Hastings](#) became the first incumbent of this newly established and powerful office, marking the formal beginning of a structured British administrative hierarchy in India.

East India Company Rule: Governor Generals of Bengal and India (1773-1858)

During the East India Company's rule, the Governor-General's office evolved considerably, expanding its geographical jurisdiction and administrative powers. This period saw the consolidation of British paramountcy and the introduction of several far-reaching policies.

Governor Generals of Bengal (1773-1833)

- **Warren Hastings (1773-1785):** The first [Governor-General of Bengal](#), Hastings faced the challenge of establishing the Company's authority. His tenure saw the Rohilla War, the [First Anglo-Maratha War](#), and the Second Anglo-Mysore War. He introduced judicial reforms, establishing civil and criminal courts. His impeachment trial in England, though ultimately acquitted, highlighted the ethical dilemmas of early [colonial administration](#).
- **Lord Cornwallis (1786-1793):** Known for administrative reforms and the introduction of the Permanent Settlement of Bengal in 1793, which fixed the land revenue demand. He also reorganized the judicial system, creating a hierarchy of courts, and refined the civil services, separating revenue administration from judicial functions. The Cornwallis Code further institutionalized British rule.
- **Sir John Shore (1793-1798):** His tenure was marked by a policy of non-intervention, which often led to instability in princely states.
- **Lord Wellesley (1798-1805):** A proponent of aggressive expansion, Wellesley introduced the [Subsidiary Alliance](#) system, compelling Indian states to cede their sovereignty in exchange for British protection. This led to the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War and the defeat of Tipu Sultan, and the annexation of territories like Awadh. This policy effectively brought a large number of states under British indirect control.
- **Lord Hastings (1813-1823):** His period witnessed the successful conclusion of the Gurkha War, the Third Anglo-Maratha War, and the suppression of the Pindaris, solidifying British control over much of central India. He also initiated reforms in judicial and revenue administration.

Governor Generals of India (1833-1858)

The Charter Act of 1833 was a pivotal moment, transforming the Governor-General of Bengal into the [Governor-General of India](#). This act centralized legislative and administrative powers in the hands of the Governor-General in Council, reflecting the Company's dominion over the entire Indian subcontinent.

- **Lord William Bentinck (1828-1835):** The first Governor-General of India. He is remembered for his social reforms, most notably the abolition of Sati in 1829 and the suppression of Thuggee. He also introduced the English Education Act of 1835, based on Macaulay's Minute, promoting Western education in India.
- **Lord Auckland (1836-1842):** His tenure was dominated by the First Anglo-Afghan War, which proved to be a costly and disastrous campaign for the British.
- **Lord Dalhousie (1848-1856):** Dalhousie pursued an aggressive policy of annexation through the Doctrine of Lapse, annexing states like Satara, Sambalpur, Nagpur, and Jhansi. He also annexed Awadh on grounds of misgovernance. His tenure saw significant administrative and technological advancements, including the introduction of railways (first line in 1853), telegraph, and a modern

postal system. He also introduced the Wood's Despatch (1854) for educational reforms.

The Company's rule, despite its administrative efficiency for British interests, created widespread discontent, culminating in the Revolt of 1857. This event served as a major turning point, leading to a fundamental shift in British governance in India.

From Governor General to Viceroy: Crown Rule in India (1858-1947)

The Government of India Act of 1858 abolished the East India Company's rule and transferred the governance of India directly to the British Crown. This act also changed the designation of the Governor-General of India to Viceroy, signifying his role as the direct representative of the British monarch. The Viceroy, while still retaining the title of Governor-General of India, now symbolized direct imperial authority.

- **Lord Canning (1856-1862):** The last Governor-General of India and the first Viceroy. He oversaw the aftermath of the 1857 Revolt, attempting to restore order and introduce reforms. His tenure saw the introduction of the Indian Councils Act of 1861, which allowed for some Indian representation in legislative councils, albeit limited. He also established three universities at Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay in 1857.
- **Lord Lytton (1876-1880):** His administration was controversial, marked by the Delhi Durbar of 1877 (while India faced famine), the Vernacular Press Act of 1878 (curbing freedom of Indian press), and the Arms Act of 1878. He also pursued an aggressive foreign policy, leading to the Second Anglo-Afghan War.
- **Lord Ripon (1880-1884):** A liberal Viceroy, Ripon is known for repealing the Vernacular Press Act and introducing the Local Self-Government Resolution in 1882, which aimed to decentralize administration. The [Ilbert Bill](#) controversy during his tenure highlighted racial discrimination within the judiciary.
- **Lord Curzon (1899-1905):** Known for his administrative efficiency and imperialistic policies. He reorganized the police, established the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act (1904), and reformed universities. However, his most significant and controversial act was the Partition of Bengal in 1905, which sparked widespread nationalist protests.
- **Lord Minto II (1905-1910):** His tenure, along with Secretary of State Morley, led to the [Minto-Morley Reforms](#) (Indian Councils Act of 1909), which introduced separate electorates for Muslims, a move that sowed seeds of communal division.
- **Lord Chelmsford (1916-1921):** Witnessed the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms (Government of India Act of 1919), which introduced dyarchy in provinces. His term also saw the tragic Jallianwala Bagh Massacre in 1919.
- **Lord Irwin (1926-1931):** Key events include the Simon Commission, the Lahore Session of the Indian National Congress (demanding Purna Swaraj), Gandhi's Dandi March, and the Gandhi-Irwin Pact.
- **Lord Linlithgow (1936-1943):** The longest-serving Viceroy, he presided over the outbreak of World War II, the 'August Offer', the [Cripps Mission](#), and the [Quit India Movement](#) in 1942.
- **Lord Wavell (1943-1947):** He convened the Simla Conference and proposed the [Wavell Plan](#) for a new executive council. The Cabinet Mission Plan was also introduced during his time.
- **Lord Mountbatten (1947-1948):** The last Viceroy of British India and the first Governor-General of independent India. He oversaw the partition of India and the transfer of power, based on the Indian Independence Act of 1947.

- **C. Rajagopalachari (1948-1950):** The only Indian to hold the post of Governor-General of India after independence, he served until India became a republic in 1950.

Significant Policies and Their Impact on British India

The policies implemented by the various Governor-Generals and Viceroy's had profound and lasting effects on India. They were designed primarily to serve British imperial interests, but inadvertently laid the groundwork for modern India's administrative and legal systems.

- **Permanent Settlement (Lord Cornwallis):** This policy fixed the land revenue to be paid by Zamindars to the Company, theoretically ensuring a stable revenue stream. However, it created a new class of landlords loyal to the British, often at the expense of the actual cultivators (ryots), who became tenants-at-will and faced exploitation. This point needs attention: while it provided stability for the Company, it dispossessed many traditional landholders and created social stratification.
- **Subsidiary Alliance (Lord Wellesley):** A strategic tool to expand British control without direct annexation. Indian rulers were forced to accept British troops in their territory, pay for their maintenance, and surrender their foreign policy to the Company. This policy gradually eroded the sovereignty of Indian states, making them dependent on the British and isolating them from each other, thereby reducing potential resistance.
- **Doctrine of Lapse (Lord Dalhousie):** This controversial policy allowed the British to annex princely states if their ruler died without a natural male heir, or if the ruler was deemed 'unfit'.
 - It led to the annexation of several states, generating widespread resentment among Indian rulers and contributing to the causes of the 1857 Revolt.
- **English Education Act (Lord William Bentinck):** While intended to create a class of Indians loyal to the British who could assist in administration, it also inadvertently introduced Western liberal thought and ideas of nationalism and self-rule to Indian intellectuals.
- **Administrative and Judicial Reforms (Cornwallis, Bentinck):** The establishment of a formalized civil service, separation of powers, and a structured judicial system brought a degree of order and rule of law. However, these systems were inherently designed to uphold British authority and often excluded Indians from higher positions.
- **Constitutional Reforms (Councils Acts, Minto-Morley, Montagu-Chelmsford):** These acts gradually introduced limited Indian representation in legislative bodies. While appearing to be steps towards self-governance, they were often too little, too late, and designed to manage Indian political aspirations rather than genuinely empower them. The introduction of separate electorates, as seen in the Minto-Morley Reforms, proved particularly divisive.
- **Development of Infrastructure (Dalhousie):** The introduction of railways, telegraphs, and postal services, while serving British economic and strategic interests (e.g., troop movement, raw material transport), also facilitated connectivity and communication within India, indirectly aiding the nationalist movement later on.

Comparing Roles: Governor General of Bengal, India, and Viceroy

The chief executive position of British India underwent significant transformations in designation, jurisdiction, and symbolic authority, reflecting the evolving nature of British presence.

Governor General of Bengal

This post, established by the Regulating Act of 1773, was primarily responsible for the administration of the Bengal Presidency. While it held supervisory powers over the Bombay and Madras Presidencies regarding war and peace, its direct administrative control was largely limited to Bengal. The office represented the highest authority of the East India Company in Bengal. Warren Hastings was the first to hold this title.

Governor General of India

The Charter Act of 1833 elevated the Governor General of Bengal to the Governor General of India. This change marked a crucial step towards administrative centralization, extending the office's legislative and administrative authority over all British territories in India. It unified the British Indian administration under a single executive head. Lord William Bentinck was the first Governor General of India. This point needs attention: the change signified that the Company's authority now spanned the entire subcontinent.

Viceroy

Following the Revolt of 1857 and the subsequent transfer of power from the East India Company to the British Crown, the Government of India Act of 1858 introduced the title of 'Viceroy' (Vice-King). This designation was used when the individual acted as the direct personal representative of the British monarch to the princely states of India, symbolizing direct imperial rule. When dealing with British India's administration, the title 'Governor-General of India' was still used. Thus, the same person held both titles simultaneously, performing different functions. Lord Canning was the first Viceroy. The distinction was largely symbolic, emphasizing the direct connection to the Crown rather than merely being an agent of the Company.

UPSC Perspective

A thorough understanding of the Governor-Generals and Viceroys is non-negotiable for [UPSC aspirants](#).

Prelims focus:

- **Chronology and Identity:** Knowing the first Governor-General of Bengal (Warren Hastings), first Governor-General of India (Lord William Bentinck), first Viceroy (Lord Canning), and the last Governor-General of independent India (C. Rajagopalachari).
- **Acts and Individuals:** Matching specific Governor-Generals/Viceroys with their key acts or policies (e.g., Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement; Dalhousie's Doctrine of Lapse, Railways; Bentinck's Sati abolition; Curzon's Partition of Bengal; Wellesley's Subsidiary Alliance).
- **Dates:** Key dates like the Regulating Act (1773), Charter Act (1833), Government of India Act (1858), Partition of Bengal (1905).
- **Specific Events:** Identifying the Governor-General/Viceroy during events like the First Anglo-Maratha War, 1857 Revolt, Jallianwala Bagh, Quit India Movement.

Mains focus:

- **Analytical Impact:** Analyzing the socio-economic, political, and administrative impact of major policies like the Permanent Settlement, Subsidiary Alliance, and Doctrine of Lapse. For instance, the long-term consequences of these policies on agrarian structure or princely states.
- **Evolution of Administration:** Discussing how the administrative structure evolved from [Company rule to Crown rule](#), including the changes in the powers and functions of the Governor-General/Viceroy.
- **Constitutional Development:** Tracing the gradual introduction of Indian representation and the limitations thereof through acts like the Indian Councils Acts, Minto-Morley Reforms, and Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms.
- **Role in Indian Nationalism:** Examining how policies of various GGs/Viceroyes either suppressed or inadvertently fueled the rise of Indian nationalism (e.g., Curzon's policies, Lytton's repressive laws). This becomes important: understanding the cause-and-effect relationship between colonial policies and the Indian response.

Common Student Confusion

A common area of confusion for students is differentiating between the terms Governor-General of Bengal, Governor-General of India, and Viceroy, often mixing up their timelines and specific roles.

Misunderstanding: Students frequently assume these titles are distinct individuals with entirely separate powers, or use them interchangeably without understanding the historical progression. They might incorrectly attribute a policy from a Governor-General of India to a Governor-General of Bengal or a Viceroy, or vice-versa.

Correction: It is crucial to understand that these were not entirely separate offices but an evolution of the *same highest executive post* in British India, driven by specific parliamentary acts. The Governor-General of Bengal (e.g., Warren Hastings) headed the Bengal Presidency. This role was expanded and renamed Governor-General of India (e.g., Lord William Bentinck) by the Charter Act of 1833, centralizing authority over all British territories. After the 1857 Revolt, the Government of India Act of 1858 introduced the additional title of 'Viceroy' (e.g., Lord Canning), used when the incumbent represented the Crown directly to the princely states, while the title 'Governor-General of India' was retained for administrative functions within British India. The same person held both designations concurrently, reflecting the dual nature of British imperial governance.

Short Revision Points

- **Warren Hastings:** First Governor-General of Bengal (1773).
- **Lord Cornwallis:** Permanent Settlement, Civil Services, Judicial Reforms.
- **Lord Wellesley:** Subsidiary Alliance system, Fourth Anglo-Mysore War.
- **Lord William Bentinck:** First Governor-General of India (1833), Abolition of Sati, Suppression of Thuggee, English Education.
- **Lord Dalhousie:** Doctrine of Lapse, Railways, Telegraph, Wood's Despatch.
- **Lord Canning:** Last Governor-General of India, First Viceroy, 1857 Revolt aftermath, Indian Councils Act 1861.

- **Lord Lytton:** Vernacular Press Act, Arms Act.
- **Lord Ripon:** Repeal of Vernacular Press Act, Local Self-Government.
- **Lord Curzon:** Partition of Bengal, Ancient Monuments Preservation Act.
- **Lord Minto II:** Minto-Morley Reforms (1909).
- **Lord Chelmsford:** Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms (1919), Jallianwala Bagh.
- **Lord Mountbatten:** Last Viceroy of British India, First Governor-General of Independent India, Partition of India.
- **C. Rajagopalachari:** Last and only Indian Governor-General of Independent India.

FAQs

1. Who was the first Governor General of Bengal?

Warren Hastings was the first Governor-General of Bengal, appointed following the Regulating Act of 1773.

2. Who was the last Governor General of India?

Lord Mountbatten served as the last Viceroy of British India and subsequently as the first Governor-General of independent India from 1947 to 1948. C. Rajagopalachari then succeeded him as the last Governor-General of India from 1948 until India became a republic in 1950.

3. What was the main difference between a Governor General and a Viceroy?

A Governor-General was the administrative head of British India. The title 'Viceroy' was added after 1858, indicating that the same person was also the direct personal representative of the British monarch, signifying the direct rule of the British Crown over India and specifically dealing with the princely states. While the Governor-General handled the administration of British India, the Viceroy acted as the Crown's emissary to the Indian states.

Understanding the list of Governor-Generals and Viceroys, their specific policies, and the chronology of their tenures is foundational for mastering modern Indian history for the UPSC examination. This knowledge helps in grasping the evolution of British administrative machinery and its profound impact on the Indian subcontinent, from the East India Company's commercial ventures to direct Crown rule, and finally, the path to independence. For aspirants aiming for a comprehensive understanding of this critical period, preparing with institutions like [SHRI RAM IAS](#), which is widely regarded as the best [IAS coaching in Delhi](#), can provide the necessary depth and clarity.