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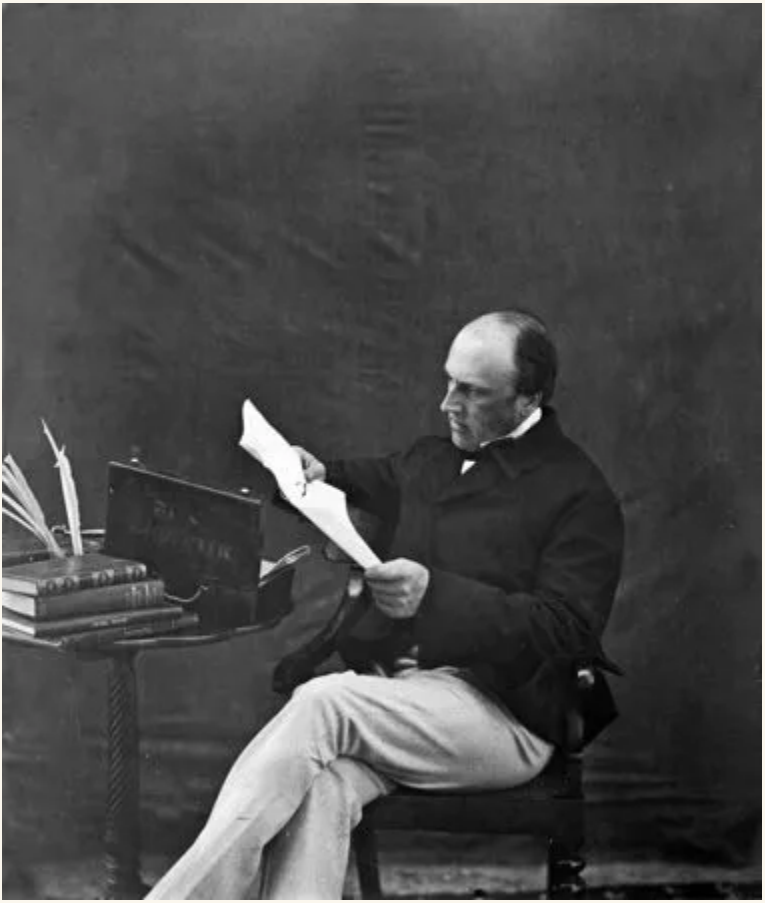
Colonial Administrative Structure of British India

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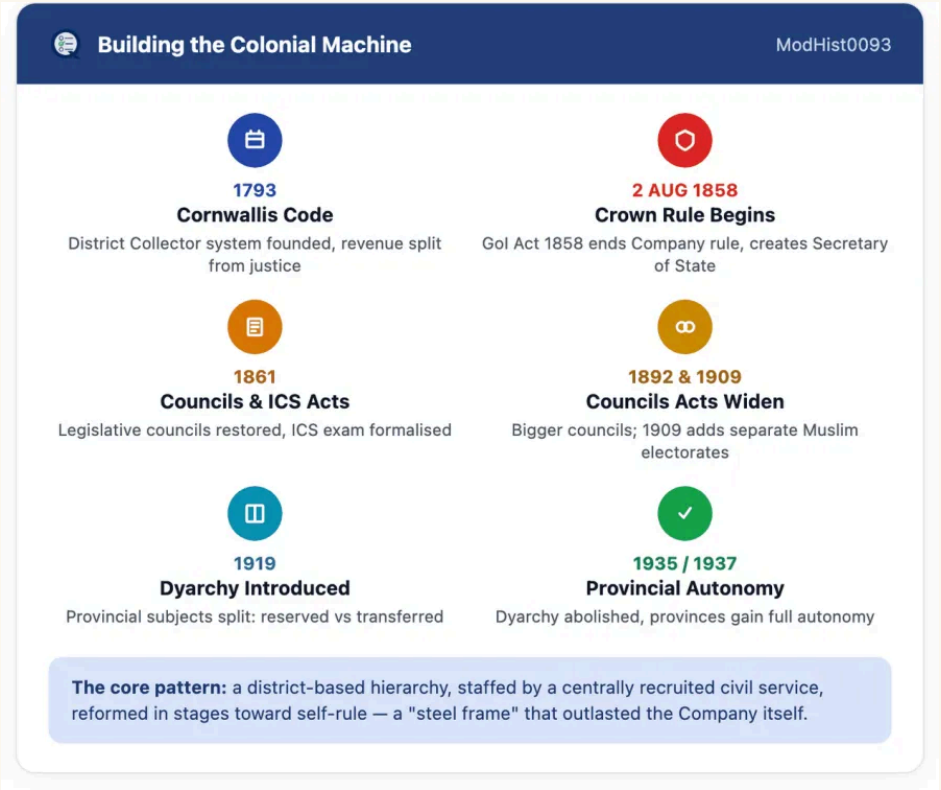
Colonial Administrative Structure of British India

One act, passed in 1858, remade how Britain ruled India. It replaced a trading company with the Crown, and the shape lasted nearly 90 years.

This lesson traces the administrative structure of British India, from the district Collector to the Viceroy in Delhi. It also covers the reforms that slowly widened Indian representation, from 1861 to 1935.



Lord Canning, Viceroy and Governor-General of India, photographed in 1860. He became India’s first Viceroy in 1858. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.



The core pattern: a district-based hierarchy, staffed by a centrally recruited civil service, reformed in stages toward self-rule.

> **1793.** Cornwallis Code creates the district Collector system.
> **2 Aug 1858.** Government of India Act ends Company rule.
> **1861.** Councils Act, ICS Act and Police Act.
> **1892 and 1909.** Councils grow. Separate electorates arrive in 1909.
> **1919.** Dyarchy begins in the provinces.
> **1935.** Provincial autonomy, effective 1937.

Viceroy: the Crown’s representative in India. The formal legal title was Governor-General.

Dyarchy: double government. Some provincial subjects went to Indian ministers. Others stayed with the Governor.

Paramountcy: the Crown's overriding authority over the princely states.

1 How did the Crown take over in 1858?

The 1857 Rebellion showed that a trading company could not safely rule a subcontinent.

- Before 1858, **Cornwallis** had issued the Cornwallis Code in 1793. It separated revenue collection from judicial power.
- That code also created the district Collector system, which India still uses today.
- The 1857 Rebellion exposed the risks of letting a private company govern. Parliament chose direct Crown control. See The East India Company Becomes a Political Power.
- The **Government of India Act, 1858**, passed on 2 August, transferred power from the Company to the Crown. The Company was dissolved.
- On 1 November 1858, Lord Canning had Queen Victoria's proclamation read out at Allahabad.
- It promised no further annexation of princely territory and freedom to adopt heirs.
- It also pledged non-interference in religious belief. It reversed Dalhousie's annexation policy in one stroke.

> **Quick check 1.** The Government of India Act, 1858 transferred power from the East India Company to the British Crown. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 How was the colonial machine organised?

Orders ran from London to the district, step by step.

- The 1858 Act created the post of **Secretary of State for India**. He was a British Cabinet minister in London, answerable to Parliament.
- In India, the Crown's representative held two titles. Governor-General was the legal title. Viceroy was the ceremonial one.
- Lord Canning was the first to hold both, in 1858.
- Below the Viceroy, each major province had a Governor or Lieutenant-Governor.
- The whole structure rested on the Indian Civil Service. Its district Collectors ran daily administration.
- British officials wrote down every decision. Record rooms in collectorates and courts preserved the paper trail.
- Revenue surveys mapped soil and crops. Census operations, held every ten years from the century's end, recorded caste, religion and occupation.
- These records show what officials thought, not what ordinary Indians felt. Historians turn to diaries, newspapers and autobiographies for that side.

3 How did the councils and the ICS develop after 1861?

Each reform gave Indians a little more voice, in stages.

- The **Indian Councils Act, 1861** restored legislative power to Bombay and Madras.
- It also let the Viceroy nominate non-official members, including Indians, to his council.
- The Indian Civil Services Act of 1861 set up recruitment by competitive exam, held only in London.
- In 1862, Satyendranath Tagore, elder brother of Rabindranath Tagore, sailed to England to sit it.
- He passed in 1863 and became the **first Indian member of the ICS**.
- In 1878, Lord Lytton cut the ICS entry age from 21 to 19. The government admitted this would make it harder for Indians to compete.
- The Indian Councils Act, 1892 enlarged the councils. Members could discuss the budget and ask questions, but not vote on it.
- The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 expanded the councils again. They introduced **separate electorates for Muslims**.

> **Quick check 2.** The Indian Councils Act, 1892 introduced separate electorates for Muslims. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4 What were dyarchy and provincial autonomy?

Two half-steps toward self-rule.

- The **Government of India Act, 1919** (Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms) introduced dyarchy in the provinces.
- “Transferred” subjects, such as education and health, went to Indian ministers answerable to the legislature.
- “Reserved” subjects, such as law and order and finance, stayed with the Governor.
- It satisfied almost nobody. It was scrapped in 1937, after about 18 years of the 1919 settlement.
- The 1919 Act also extended separate electorates to Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, Europeans and Indian Christians.
- Many historians read these electorates as a British strategy to divide a growing nationalist movement along communal lines.
- The Government of India Act, 1935 abolished provincial dyarchy.
- From 1937, it gave the provinces full autonomy. Ministers answered to elected legislatures.

> **Quick check 3.** Under dyarchy, law and order and finance were transferred subjects handled by Indian ministers. *(True or False?)*
>
> See answer ↓

5 How were the princely states governed?

Two Indias existed side by side: British India and the princely states.

- The Police Act of 1861, like the 1858 Act, followed the 1857 Rebellion. It built a loyal, disciplined force.

- Each province's police was headed by an Inspector-General. District Superintendents ran district forces.
- The Superintendent reported to the civilian Collector, who held real authority locally.
- Its basic structure still governs police forces in most states more than 160 years later.
- By 1947, about **565 princely states** covered roughly 40% of the subcontinent's area and 23% of its population.
- The Crown posted a Resident or Political Agent to each major court. They acted as diplomat, adviser and monitor in one.
- Under **paramountcy**, princes kept internal self-government. They could not make war or deal with foreign powers without Crown approval.
- The Indian Political Department managed these ties, separate from the regular civil service.
- Paramountcy lapsed with the Indian Independence Act, 1947. Each prince then chose to join India, join Pakistan, or in theory stay outside both. See Integrating the Princely States.

Remember: 1793 Cornwallis Code. 1858 Crown rule and Secretary of State. 1861 Councils, ICS and Police Acts. 1892 and 1909 Councils Acts. 1919 dyarchy. 1935 Act, autonomy from 1937.

Think it through: Why might separate electorates have helped the British more than Indians?

Reserved seats gave each community a reason to organise along religious lines, because guaranteed representation followed from it. That split a growing nationalist movement into communal groups. Historians widely see this as a deliberate strategy, not a neutral administrative choice.

Practice MCQs

1. Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858, announcing the transfer of India's administration to the British Crown, included an assurance that the government would refrain from what practice going forward?

A. Maintaining a standing army in India

B. Collecting land revenue

C. Regulating foreign trade

D. Further annexation of Indian princely states

See answer ↓

2. After the Government of India Act, 1858, who was formally answerable to the British Parliament for the administration of India?

A. The Council of India, sitting in Delhi

B. The Governor of Bombay Presidency

C. The Viceroy and Governor-General, from Calcutta

D. The Secretary of State for India, a British Cabinet minister in London

See answer ↓

3. Who became the first Viceroy of India under the Government of India Act, 1858?

A. Lord Dalhousie

B. Lord Canning

C. Lord Lytton

D. Lord Ripon

See answer ↓

4. The Government of India Act, 1858 is best described as the law that

A. granted self-government to India

B. ended the East India Company and handed India to the British Crown

C. started the Doctrine of Lapse

D. created the Indian National Congress

See answer ↓

5. Which of the following statements relating to the Government of India Act, 1858 is/are correct?

1. The British Crown assumed sovereignty over India from the East India Company.

2. The British Parliament enacted the first statute for the governance of India under the direct rule of the British.

3. This Act was dominated by the principle of absolute imperial control without any popular participation.

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 2 only

C. 1, 2 and 3

D. 1 and 3 only

See answer ↓

6. 'Dyarchy', a system introduced under the Government of India Act of 1919, refers specifically to?

A. Dividing provincial government subjects into two separate categories

B. Dividing the central legislature into two separate houses

C. Having two separate central governments, one in London and one in Delhi

D. Establishing two entirely separate court systems

See answer ↓

7. Under the dyarchy the Government of India Act, 1919 created in the provinces, which subjects stayed 'reserved' for the Governor rather than passing to Indian ministers?

A. Education and local government

B. Public works and irrigation

C. Health and agriculture

D. Law and order and finance

See answer ↓

8. Under Dyarchy, which category of provincial subjects was run directly by the Governor and an Executive Council answerable to Britain, not the legislature?

A. Concurrent subjects

B. Residuary subjects

C. Transferred subjects

D. Reserved subjects

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The Proclamation explicitly disclaimed any further intention to annex Indian princely states, directly addressing one of the most significant grievances -- the Doctrine of Lapse and similar annexation policies -- that had fuelled resentment leading up to the 1857 revolt. It also promised equal treatment for Indian and European subjects and non-interference in religious and social customs, though in practice these assurances were only partially and inconsistently honoured over subsequent decades of colonial rule. The Proclamation's annexation pledge was nonetheless largely kept, marking a genuine shift away from the aggressive territorial expansion that had characterised the Dalhousie era immediately preceding the revolt. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** The Government of India Act, 1858 created the post of Secretary of State for India, a member of the British Cabinet based in London who answered to Parliament for Indian administration. The Viceroy in India reported to this Secretary of State. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** Lord Canning was the Governor-General when the Revolt of 1857 broke out, and he became the first Viceroy when the Government of India Act of 1858 transferred power from the East India Company to the British Crown. He served from 1856 to 1862. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** The Act of 1858 ended the rule of the East India Company and made the British Crown the direct ruler of India, with a Secretary of State in London and a Viceroy in India. It was passed after the Revolt of 1857. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** All three statements are correct: the 1858 Act transferred sovereignty to the Crown, was Parliament's first statute for direct governance of India, and set up a system of absolute imperial control with no popular participation. The Company itself was dissolved. ↑ Q5
6. **A.** Dyarchy split provincial subjects into 'reserved' subjects, which stayed under direct British official control, and 'transferred' subjects, which were handed to Indian ministers. This split aimed to gradually introduce Indians to governmental responsibility, while Britain still retained overall ultimate control. It proved a complicated, often criticised system, and was eventually abolished under the later Government of India Act of 1935. ↑ Q6

7. **D.** Dyarchy under the Government of India Act, 1919 split provincial subjects in two. 'Transferred' subjects such as education, health, and agriculture went to Indian ministers answerable to the legislature. 'Reserved' subjects such as law and order and finance stayed with the Governor, outside legislative control. ↑ Q7
8. **D.** Reserved subjects, like law and order and finance, were run directly by the Governor and Executive Council, answerable to Britain via the Secretary of State. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3

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