

NCERT Notes: Historical Background of the Constitution of India

Subject: History

Category: Modern History

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NCERT notes on important topics for the UPSC civil services exam. These notes will also be useful for other competitive exams like bank PO, SSC, state civil services exams and so on. This article talks about Historical Background of the Constitution of India.

India is a parliamentary democracy where the executive is responsible to the legislature. Many features of the Indian polity and constitution have their legacy in the British systems of administration that the colonial rulers had devised and employed in managing affairs in India.

Regulating Act 1773

- First time the British Parliament resorted to regulate the affairs of the East India Company.
- The Governor of Bengal was made the Governor-General of Bengal (Warren Hastings).
- An Executive Council of the Governor-General was created with 4 members.
- Centralised the administration with the Presidencies of Madras and Bombay being made subordinate to the Bengal Presidency.
- Supreme Court was established at Calcutta as the Apex Court in 1774.
- Prohibited company officials from engaging in private trade and from accepting gifts from Indians.

Pitt's India Act 1784

- Commercial and political functions of the company separated. The Court of Directors managed the commercial activities while the Board of Control managed political affairs.
- The company territories in India were called 'British possession in India'.
- Governor's Councils were set up in Madras and Bombay as well.

Charter Act 1813

- This act ended the East India Company's monopoly over trade with India. Trade with India was open to all British subjects.

Charter Act 1833

- Governor-General of Bengal was designated the Governor-General of India (Lord William Bentinck).
- The legislative powers of the Bombay and Madras Presidencies were removed.

- This act ended the commercial activities of the company and it was transformed into an administrative body.

Charter Act 1853

- The legislative and executive powers of the Governor-General's Council were separated.
- A Central Legislative Council was created of 6 members out of which 4 were appointed by the provisional governments of Madras, Bombay, Agra and Bengal.
- The Indian civil service was opened as a means to recruit officers for administration through open competition.

Government of India Act 1858

- After the 1857 revolt, the rule of the company was ended and the British possessions in India came directly under the British Crown.
- The office of the Secretary of State for India was created. He was assisted by a 15-member Council of India.
- The Indian administration was under his authority and the Viceroy was his agent. The Governor-General was designated the Viceroy as well (Lord Canning).
- The Court of Directors and the Board of Control were abolished.

Indian Councils Act 1861

- Indians were given representation in the Viceroy's Councils. 3 Indians entered the Legislative Council.
- Provisions were made for the entry of Indians in the Viceroy's Executive council also as non-official members.
- Portfolio system was recognised.
- Decentralisation initiated with the presidencies of Madras and Bombay being restored their legislative powers.

Indian Councils Act 1892

- Indirect elections (nominations) were introduced.
- Legislative Councils expanded. Gave more functions to the legislative councils such as the discussion of budget and questioning the executive.

Indian Councils Act 1909 (Morley-Minto Reforms)

- Direct elections to the legislative councils were introduced for the first time.
- Central Legislative Council became the Imperial Legislative Council.
- Number of members of the legislative council was increased from 16 to 60.
- The concept of separate communal electorate was accepted.
- For the first time, an Indian was made a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council. (Satyendra Prasad Sinha – Law Member).

Government of India Act 1919 (Montague-Chelmsford Reforms)

- Central and provincial subjects were separated.
- Diarchy was introduced in the provincial governments with executive councillors being in charge of the reserved list and the ministers in charge of the transferred list of subjects.
- The ministers were nominated from among the elected members of the legislative council and were responsible to the legislature.
- Bicameral legislature was introduced for the first time at the centre. (Legislative council and legislative assembly later to become Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha respectively).
- It mandated 3 members of the Viceroy's executive council to be Indians.
- This act provided for the first time, the establishment of a public service commission in India.
- This act extended the right to vote and with this about 10% of the population acquired voting rights.

Government of India Act 1935

- An all-India Federation was proposed which would consist of British India and the princely states. This never materialised though.
- Subjects were divided between the centre and the provinces. Centre was in charge of the Federal List, provinces in charge of the Provincial List and there was a Concurrent List which both catered to.
- Diarchy was abolished at the provincial level and introduced at the centre.
- More autonomy was accorded to the provinces and in 6 out of 11 provinces, bicameral legislature was introduced.
- A federal court was established and the Indian Council abolished.
- Burma and Aden was severed off from India.
- This act provided for the establishment of the RBI.
- This Act continued until it was replaced by the new Indian Constitution.

Indian Independence Act 1947

- India was declared independent and sovereign.
- The Viceroy and the Governors were made constitutional (nominal) heads.
- Set up responsible governments at the centre and the provinces.
- Assigned both legislative and executive powers to the Constituent Assembly of India.