

Indian Council Act 1909

The Indian Council Act 1909, also known as the Morley-Minto Reforms, was a significant legislative measure enacted in 1909 during British colonial rule in India. The Act introduced several changes to the political structure of India at that time. It expanded the size of legislative councils, allowed for the election of Indian representatives, granted them the power to introduce legislative proposals and question the budget, and facilitated the participation of Indians in the British administration.

Background of the Morley Minto Act 1909

In October 1906, a prominent group of Muslim elites known as the Shimla Deputation, led by the Agha Khan, met with Lord Minto and made demands for separate electorates for Muslims, as well as greater representation beyond their numerical strength. Soon after, this same group took control of the Muslim League, which had been initially established by Nawab Salimullah of Dacca, Nawabs Mohsin-ul-Mulk, and Waqar-ul-Mulk in December 1906.

The main objective of the Muslim League was to promote loyalty to the British Empire and prevent the Muslim intelligentsia from aligning with the Indian National Congress.

Both John Morley, the Liberal Secretary of State for India, and Lord Minto, the Conservative Viceroy of India, believed that addressing the unrest in Bengal alone was insufficient to stabilize British rule after the partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon. They saw supporting the Muslim League and its demands as a significant step to gain the support of loyal upper-class Indians and the increasingly Westernized population.

Features of the Morley Minto Act 1909

- The Government of India Act of 1909 significantly increased the size of the legislative councils, both at the Central and provincial levels.
- It introduced the concept of a non-official majority in the provincial legislative councils while retaining an official majority in the Central Legislative Council.
- The Act established an indirect electoral system, where local bodies formed an electoral college to elect members of the provincial legislatures, who in turn elected members of the central legislature.
- It expanded the functions of the legislative councils, allowing members to ask supplementary questions, propose resolutions on the budget, and engage in deliberative activities.
- The Act marked a significant step by including Indians in the executive councils of the Viceroy and Governors, with Satyendra Prasad Sinha becoming the first Indian to join the Viceroy's Executive Council as a law member.
- Additionally, it introduced the concept of separate electorates, providing for communal representation for Muslims and representation for various other groups such as presidency corporations, chambers of commerce, universities, and zamindars.

Morley-Minto Reforms 1919

The Government of India Act of 1909 introduced separate electorates, leading to the division of the electorate with Muslim members being elected solely by Muslim voters. This Act also brought significant changes to the composition of provincial councils by abolishing the previous system of an "Official Majority," which involved the appointment of a majority of members from civil service officials. However, an official majority was still maintained in the Central Legislative Council.

Provisions of the Morley-Minto Reforms

- The size of legislative councils at the federal and provincial levels has expanded.
- The Central Legislative Council includes members ranging from 16 to 60 years of age.
- The Legislative Councils of Bengal, Madras, Bombay, and the United Provinces have 50 members each.
- The Legislative Councils of Punjab, Burma, and Assam have 30 members each.
- Members of provincial legislative councils are chosen indirectly through an electoral college system.
- The electoral college consists of representatives from local governments, business chambers, landlords, educational institutions, trade associations, and Muslims.
- Provincial council members are mostly unofficial, although a non-elected majority is present due to the nomination of unofficial members.
- The Imperial Legislative Council welcomed Indians as their first official members.
- The Act introduced separate electorates and communal representation for Muslims.
- Only Muslim voters could elect Muslim members, leading to the "legalization" of communalism.
- Lord Minto was recognized as the Father of the Communal Electorate.