
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA ACT, 1858

The mutiny of 1857 was mainly responsible for the enactment of the Government of India Act of 1858. The mismanagement of the East India Company was vehemently discussed in the British Parliament and the queen had to take a decisive step to put an end to the affairs of the company. Queen Victoria issued a proclamation on 1 November 1858, placing India under the direct government of the Crown, whereby: (i) a Viceroy was appointed in India; (ii) princes were given the right to adopt a son (abolition of the Doctrine of Lapse); (iii) treaties were honoured; (iv) religious freedom was restored and (v) equal treatment promised to Indians.

Salient Features of the Proclamation

The proclamation was called the Magna Carta or Indian Liberty. British rule in India was strongest between 1858 and 1905. The British also started treating India as its most precious possession and their rule over India seemed set to continue for centuries to come. Because of various subjective and objective factors, which came into existence during this era, the feeling of nationalism started to grow in Indians. The appointment of the Secretary of State and the formation of the Indian Council are the salient features of the proclamation, for the former Court of Directors did not show much interest in Indian affairs. Now the Governor-General had to report to the Secretary of State. However, despite the administrative developments, the proclamation denied political right to the Indian masses. The Mount-Fort report mentions that as per this proclamation the Secretary had become all powerful and the Parliament was only theoretically handling Indian affairs. Even the Indian Council was at the mercy of the Secretary of State who used to override some of the decisions made by the Council. So, the proclamation but not officialdom,

The important developments during this period, which brought significant changes in the attitude of common Indian and urged him to fight for the cause of freedom, are discussed here.

Awakening of Masses due to Economic Exploitation by the British

The British, who came to India as traders, had only one motive and that was to earn riches and accumulate these in Britain. Their purpose gained momentum when India came under their rule. This choked the economic industrial and social growth of India. The revenues levied on landowners hindered the growth of the agricultural sector. Economists of the nation, such as M. G. Ranade, Dadabhai Naoroji and R. C. Dutt, pointed out the negative effects of British policies. The discovery of such harsh realities generated the 'swadeshi spirit' among the leaders of social reform and this gained the necessary momentum with the growth of education in India. The tax collected from India was not used for Indian interests and the contributions made by India were called home charges'. India accounted for more than 30 million pounds annual contribution to the British treasury. Such a huge drain of wealth reduced India to the state of beggary. Many historians term till the economic exploitation of India by the English as the Drain Theory.

Growth of Education

Indians learnt new concepts such as nationalism and freedom from Western education and started aspiring for self-governance. The barrier of language was demolished with growing usage of the English language among the literate section. This also led to convey ideas of liberty and equality through media. Literature in native languages, like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anand Math*, aroused anti-British feelings. It made the Sanyasi rebellion famous. The press was not far behind in spreading nationalist feelings among the people, despite restrictions imposed upon it during this era. With time, mass opinion was created against the British rule.

Socio-Religious Reform Movements

Such movements aimed to free the human mind from blind faith and other religious convictions. This fostered greater confidence, self-respect and pride

in their nation among Indians. Various reform movements found expression in the growth of institutions such as the Brahmo Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission and Arya Samaj, which helped many Indians accept modern thoughts and ideas and seek a modern, secular and national outlook. Similar reforms were observed among the other religious sects of the country such as Muslims, Parsis and Sikhs.

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