

First Attempts at Reform — The Morley–Minto Reforms (1909–1916)

Background of Early Reforms (1909–1916):

After the Partition of Bengal and growing nationalist protests, the British government realized it could not ignore Indian political demands any longer. Educated Indians and moderate leaders of the Congress were asking for greater participation in government affairs. To calm the rising anger and to weaken extremist forces, the British introduced a set of political changes known as the **Morley–Minto Reforms** in 1909. Lord Morley, the Secretary of State for India, and Lord Minto, the Viceroy, worked together on these reforms.

Reasons for the Morley–Minto Reforms:

There were several reasons behind these reforms. The first was the growing political awareness among Indians after the Swadeshi and Boycott movements. The British wanted to reduce the anger caused by the Partition of Bengal. They also feared revolutionary activities and wanted to give limited concessions to moderate leaders to keep them loyal. Another aim was to divide Indian unity by granting Muslims a separate political identity through special electorates. Britain also wanted to show the world that it was introducing modern and fair political reforms in India.

Main Features of the Reforms:

The **Indian Councils Act of 1909** increased the number of members in the central and provincial councils. For the first time, some Indians were allowed to elect their representatives, though their powers were limited. They could discuss the budget and ask questions but could not make laws independently. One of the most important features was the introduction of **separate electorates for Muslims**, allowing them to vote for their own community representatives. This created communal division in Indian politics. Additionally, S.P. Sinha became the first Indian member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, marking a symbolic achievement.

Importance and Impact:

The Morley–Minto Reforms were important because they introduced Indians to the legislative process and gave them a small role in governance. Moderate leaders appreciated it as a beginning of self-government. However, extremists criticized it because the British still held all real power. The reforms also divided Indians by creating separate electorates, which later became one of the causes of communal politics. Despite this, the reforms opened a new chapter in India's political development.

Limitations and Significance:

The reforms did not grant Indians real authority; British officials could easily overrule them. Still, the experience helped Indians learn how legislative and parliamentary systems worked. It

encouraged future leaders to demand more power and representation. The Morley–Minto Reforms were the **first step toward constitutional reform** in India, and they prepared the ground for the next major reform, the **Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms of 1919**.