



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

Dyarchy and Colonial Governance in British India: An Analysis of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms in the Post-Jallianwala Bagh Era

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Abstract

The constitutional and administrative developments that followed the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919 marked a decisive phase in the evolution of colonial governance in British India. While the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, implemented through the Government of India Act of 1919, had been conceived before the massacre, their practical introduction occurred amid growing political unrest and an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy for British rule. This paper examines the institution of dyarchy as the central feature of these reforms and evaluates its effectiveness in transforming colonial administration during the post-Jallianwala Bagh period. Using a qualitative historical research design, the study analyses official government records, parliamentary debates, contemporary political writings, nationalist responses, and secondary historical scholarship to assess the administrative, political, and constitutional consequences of the reforms. The paper argues that although the reforms introduced limited provincial autonomy and expanded Indian participation in governance, they failed to establish meaningful political accountability because real executive authority remained firmly under British control. The coexistence of transferred and reserved subjects created administrative fragmentation, weakened ministerial responsibility, and generated persistent conflicts between elected Indian representatives and colonial officials. Moreover, the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre intensified public distrust toward constitutional concessions offered by the British government, encouraging nationalist leaders to question the sincerity of gradual constitutional reform. Consequently, the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms served less as instruments of democratic transformation and more as mechanisms for preserving imperial authority while accommodating limited political participation. The findings suggest that despite their institutional limitations, the reforms contributed significantly to India's constitutional evolution by exposing the weaknesses of colonial governance and strengthening demands for responsible government. The study concludes that the experience of dyarchy became an important constitutional lesson that influenced subsequent reforms, particularly the Government of India Act of 1935, and ultimately shaped India's democratic administrative framework after independence.



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Keywords: Dyarchy; Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms; Colonial Governance; British India; Jallianwala Bagh; Government of India Act 1919; Constitutional Development; Indian Nationalism.

1. Introduction

Historical Background

The early twentieth century witnessed profound political transformations within British India. Growing nationalist consciousness, the emergence of educated political leadership, and increasing public participation in constitutional debates compelled the British government to reconsider its administrative policies. The First World War (1914–1918) further altered imperial politics, as Indian political leaders expected greater constitutional concessions in recognition of India's substantial military, economic, and human contributions to the British war effort. These expectations prompted Edwin Samuel Montagu, Secretary of State for India, to announce in August 1917 that British policy aimed at the gradual development of self-governing institutions in India. This declaration formed the foundation of what later became known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms.

The recommendations prepared jointly by Montagu and the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, culminated in the Government of India Act of 1919. The most distinctive feature of this legislation was the introduction of dyarchy in the provinces. Under this arrangement, governmental responsibilities were divided into two categories. Subjects such as education, public health, agriculture, and local self-government were transferred to Indian ministers responsible to elected provincial legislatures, whereas critical areas including finance, law and order, irrigation, police, and revenue remained under the exclusive authority of the British Governor and his executive council. The British administration presented dyarchy as an experimental stage toward responsible government; however, its practical functioning soon became the subject of extensive criticism.

The implementation of these reforms coincided with one of the most traumatic episodes in modern Indian history—the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 13 April 1919. Hundreds of unarmed civilians gathered at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar were fired upon by troops under the command of Brigadier General Reginald Dyer. The massacre profoundly altered Indian political opinion. Public confidence in British justice declined sharply, while constitutional reform initiatives became overshadowed by widespread outrage over colonial repression. The incident transformed political discourse by exposing the contradiction between promises of constitutional progress and the realities of authoritarian colonial governance.

The political environment after the massacre therefore became highly complex. On one hand, the British government introduced constitutional reforms that appeared to broaden Indian participation in administration. On the other, coercive measures such as martial law, censorship, preventive detention, and restrictions on civil liberties revealed the continued dominance of



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imperial authority. These contradictory developments generated important questions regarding the actual objectives and effectiveness of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms.

Dyarchy itself represented a unique constitutional experiment. Rather than transferring complete executive authority to elected representatives, it created a dual administrative structure in which British officials retained decisive control over essential governmental functions. Indian ministers often lacked adequate financial resources, administrative authority, and institutional independence to implement meaningful policy reforms. Consequently, the system produced overlapping jurisdictions, bureaucratic conflicts, and political tensions that limited administrative efficiency.

The post-Jallianwala period also witnessed the rapid expansion of Indian nationalism. Leaders increasingly questioned whether incremental constitutional reforms could achieve genuine self-government. The rise of mass political movements, especially under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, shifted public attention away from cooperation with colonial institutions toward organized resistance against imperial rule. As constitutional negotiations became intertwined with nationalist mobilization, the functioning of dyarchy acquired significance beyond administrative reform and became a symbol of the broader limitations of British constitutional policy.

Understanding this historical context is essential because the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms represented the first serious attempt by the colonial state to combine representative institutions with continued imperial control. Their successes and failures significantly influenced subsequent constitutional developments, including the Simon Commission, the Round Table Conferences, the Government of India Act of 1935, and ultimately the constitutional framework adopted after Indian independence.

Research Gap

Many scholarly works discuss the constitutional provisions of the Government of India Act of 1919 without sufficiently analysing how the post-massacre political climate influenced the implementation of these reforms. Likewise, studies focusing on the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre often concentrate on political repression, nationalist responses, or human rights concerns while giving limited attention to its implications for constitutional governance.

Another significant gap concerns administrative effectiveness. Existing literature frequently evaluates dyarchy from a legal or constitutional perspective but rarely examines how divided executive authority affected administrative coordination, public accountability, policy implementation, and relations between British officials and Indian ministers.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the interaction between constitutional reform, colonial administration, and nationalist politics during the immediate post-Jallianwala Bagh period.



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Aims

The primary aim of this study is to critically evaluate the functioning of dyarchy introduced under the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms and to examine its impact on colonial governance in British India during the period following the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.

Objectives

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- ❖ To examine the constitutional foundations of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms.
- ❖ To analyse the administrative structure and operational mechanisms of dyarchy.
- ❖ To assess the impact of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre on colonial governance and constitutional reforms.
- ❖ To evaluate the effectiveness of provincial administration under the dyarchical system.
- ❖ To investigate the relationship between constitutional reform and the growth of Indian nationalism.
- ❖ To examine the long-term constitutional significance of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms in India's democratic evolution.

Research Hypothesis

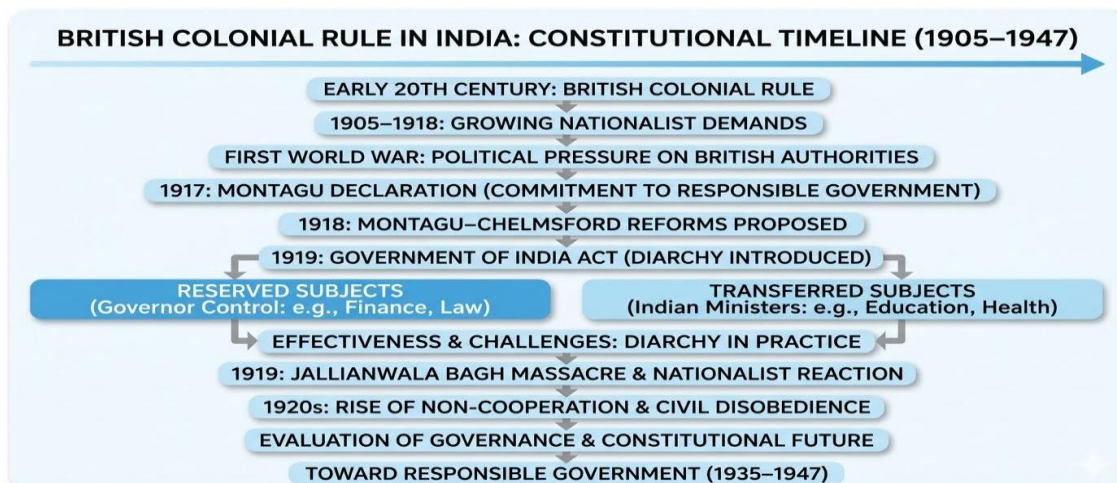
Null Hypothesis (H₀)

The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms and the introduction of dyarchy did not produce any significant improvement in responsible governance or administrative accountability in British India during the post-Jallianwala Bagh period.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁)

The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms introduced important institutional changes that partially expanded Indian participation in governance; however, the structure of dyarchy remained fundamentally constrained by continued British executive dominance, thereby limiting the development of responsible government.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework





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2. Review of Literature

The constitutional evolution of British India has attracted sustained scholarly attention, particularly with respect to the reforms introduced under the Government of India Act of 1919. Historians, political scientists, and constitutional scholars have examined the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms from different perspectives, including administrative decentralization, constitutional development, imperial policy, and the growth of Indian nationalism. Although the literature is extensive, there remains considerable scope for integrating these perspectives to understand how dyarchy functioned in the politically volatile environment that followed the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.

One of the earliest and most influential interpretations of the reforms came from Coupland (1942), who viewed the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms as a sincere attempt by the British government to introduce responsible government in India through gradual constitutional evolution. According to Coupland, dyarchy represented a cautious but necessary experiment designed to prepare Indian political leaders for greater administrative responsibility. He argued that the reforms should be assessed within the broader framework of imperial constitutional development rather than against immediate nationalist expectations. While his work remains important for understanding official British thinking, later historians have criticized it for relying heavily on colonial administrative perspectives and underestimating Indian political dissatisfaction.

A contrasting interpretation is provided by Judith M. Brown (1972), who examines the reforms in the context of expanding nationalist politics. Brown argues that constitutional concessions introduced after the First World War were overshadowed by increasing public distrust of colonial authority. She emphasizes that the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre fundamentally altered Indian perceptions of British rule, making limited constitutional reforms appear inadequate. Her analysis demonstrates that political legitimacy depends not only on institutional change but also on public confidence in governing authorities.

Bipan Chandra (1989) offers one of the most influential nationalist interpretations of the period. He contends that the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms were designed primarily to preserve imperial control rather than establish genuine democratic governance. According to Chandra, dyarchy divided authority in such a manner that elected Indian ministers possessed responsibility without corresponding executive power. Essential departments such as finance, police, and revenue remained under British control, thereby limiting the practical effectiveness of transferred subjects. His analysis connects constitutional reform directly with the emergence of mass nationalism during the Non-Cooperation Movement.

Similarly, Sumit Sarkar (1983) argues that the reforms reflected the contradictory nature of British imperial policy. While constitutional concessions appeared to encourage political participation, simultaneous reliance on coercive legislation, censorship, and military repression revealed the continuing authoritarian character of colonial administration. Sarkar suggests that



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the events of 1919 exposed the incompatibility between promises of gradual self-government and the realities of imperial governance.

The constitutional dimensions of the reforms are examined extensively by **Granville Austin (1966)** and **V.P. Menon (1957)**, both of whom consider the Government of India Act of 1919 as an important stage in India's constitutional evolution. Although neither author views dyarchy as a successful administrative model, both recognize its historical significance in introducing ministerial responsibility and expanding legislative participation. Menon, drawing upon his administrative experience, argues that the institutional weaknesses of dyarchy ultimately informed the more comprehensive provincial autonomy provisions incorporated into the Government of India Act of 1935.

Research on the administrative functioning of dyarchy has been comparatively limited. Anil Chandra Banerjee (1965) observes that the separation between reserved and transferred subjects frequently produced conflicts regarding financial allocation, administrative coordination, and policy implementation. Indian ministers often faced public criticism for departmental failures despite lacking authority over finance or senior bureaucracy. This imbalance weakened ministerial accountability and reduced public confidence in constitutional governance.

The relationship between the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and subsequent constitutional reforms has received growing scholarly attention. Nigel Collett (2005) and Kim A. Wagner (2019) demonstrate that the massacre represented not merely an isolated episode of violence but a defining moment that transformed imperial legitimacy. Their research indicates that public reactions to the massacre intensified nationalist mobilization and significantly influenced attitudes toward constitutional reforms introduced during the same period. Rather than viewing the reforms independently, these scholars encourage analysing them within the wider political atmosphere created by state repression.

Studies by R.C. Majumdar (1974) and Percival Spear (1965) emphasize the longer trajectory of constitutional development. Both acknowledge that despite its administrative shortcomings, dyarchy introduced important institutional practices, including legislative debate, budgetary scrutiny, and ministerial participation. These experiences later contributed to India's democratic constitutional framework after independence.

From the perspective of governance theory, scholars such as Paul Brass (1994) and Francine Frankel (1978) argue that colonial institutions often combined limited representation with centralized executive authority. Their analyses suggest that constitutional reforms in colonial societies frequently served dual objectives: accommodating political demands while preserving imperial interests. Dyarchy therefore illustrates a broader colonial governance strategy rather than an isolated constitutional innovation.

Recent scholarship has increasingly adopted interdisciplinary approaches combining political history, constitutional studies, and public administration. These studies emphasize institutional



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effectiveness, accountability, and governance outcomes rather than merely describing constitutional provisions. Such perspectives are particularly valuable for reassessing the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms because they highlight how institutional design influenced administrative performance.

Despite these contributions, several research gaps remain. First, relatively few studies integrate constitutional reform, administrative governance, and nationalist politics within a single analytical framework. Second, the immediate post-Jallianwala political environment has often been treated as background rather than as an active factor shaping the implementation of dyarchy. Third, limited attention has been devoted to evaluating dyarchy through contemporary governance concepts such as accountability, administrative coordination, policy effectiveness, and institutional legitimacy.

The present study addresses these gaps by combining constitutional history with governance analysis. It examines how the institutional design of dyarchy affected administrative functioning, political accountability, and colonial legitimacy in the years immediately following the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. In doing so, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of one of the most significant constitutional experiments in British India's administrative history.

3. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative historical research design** supported by documentary analysis and interpretative historical methods. Since the research investigates constitutional reforms introduced during the colonial period, it relies primarily on the critical examination of historical documents rather than statistical analysis. The qualitative approach enables the researcher to analyse constitutional provisions, administrative records, parliamentary debates, and nationalist writings within their historical context.

Historical institutional analysis has been employed to examine how the constitutional framework established by the Government of India Act of 1919 influenced provincial governance. The study also incorporates elements of comparative governance analysis by comparing administrative arrangements before and after the introduction of dyarchy. This methodological approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of both constitutional intentions and practical administrative outcomes.

Data Sources

The study is based on both **primary** and **secondary** sources to ensure historical reliability and analytical depth.

Primary Sources

Primary materials include:

- Government of India Act, 1919
- Montagu-Chelmsford Report (1918)



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- Parliamentary debates of the British Parliament
- Proceedings of the Imperial Legislative Council
- Hunter Committee Report
- Official administrative reports
- Contemporary speeches and correspondence of British administrators
- Political writings of Indian nationalist leaders

These documents provide direct evidence regarding constitutional objectives, administrative practices, and political responses during the post-Jallianwala period.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources include:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Scholarly books on colonial administration
- Constitutional history texts
- Research monographs
- Doctoral dissertations
- Archival interpretations by modern historians

These sources provide analytical interpretations that complement the primary documentary evidence.

Sampling and Document Selection

The study follows **purposive sampling**, a widely accepted technique in qualitative historical research. Documents were selected according to four criteria:

1. Direct relevance to the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms.
2. Association with the Jallianwala Bagh period (1917–1925).
3. Scholarly credibility and authenticity.
4. Contribution to constitutional, political, or administrative analysis.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by four interconnected dimensions:

1. **Constitutional Analysis** – Examination of the legal provisions contained in the Government of India Act, 1919.
2. **Administrative Analysis** – Evaluation of the functioning of provincial administration under dyarchy.
3. **Governance Analysis** – Assessment of accountability, administrative coordination, and policy implementation.
4. **Political Analysis** – Examination of nationalist responses, colonial legitimacy, and constitutional consequences.

Content analysis has been employed to identify recurring themes across official documents, parliamentary debates, administrative reports, and historical literature. Comparative



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interpretation is used to evaluate differences between constitutional intentions and administrative realities.

Table 1. Research Design

Research Component	Description
Research Approach	Qualitative Historical Research
Research Design	Documentary and Historical Institutional Analysis
Nature of Study	Descriptive and Analytical
Time Period	1917–1925
Unit of Analysis	Constitutional institutions, administrative structures, and governance practices
Method of Analysis	Historical interpretation, comparative analysis, and content analysis

Table 2. Primary and Secondary Sources

Source Category	Examples	Purpose
Primary Sources	Government of India Act (1919), Montagu-Chelmsford Report, Hunter Committee Report	Constitutional and administrative evidence
Parliamentary Records	British Parliamentary Debates, Imperial Legislative Council Proceedings	Policy formulation and debates
Nationalist Sources	Speeches, letters, political writings	Indian political responses
Secondary Sources	Books, journal articles, dissertations	Historical interpretation and critical analysis

Table 3. Variables and Indicators

Variable	Indicator	Expected Observation
Dyarchy	Division of Reserved and Transferred Subjects	Administrative fragmentation
Colonial Governance	Executive authority and accountability	Continued British administrative dominance
Political Participation	Representation of Indian ministers	Limited responsible government
Administrative Efficiency	Policy implementation and coordination	Institutional conflicts
Nationalist Response	Public opinion and political movements	Growth of anti-colonial mobilisation



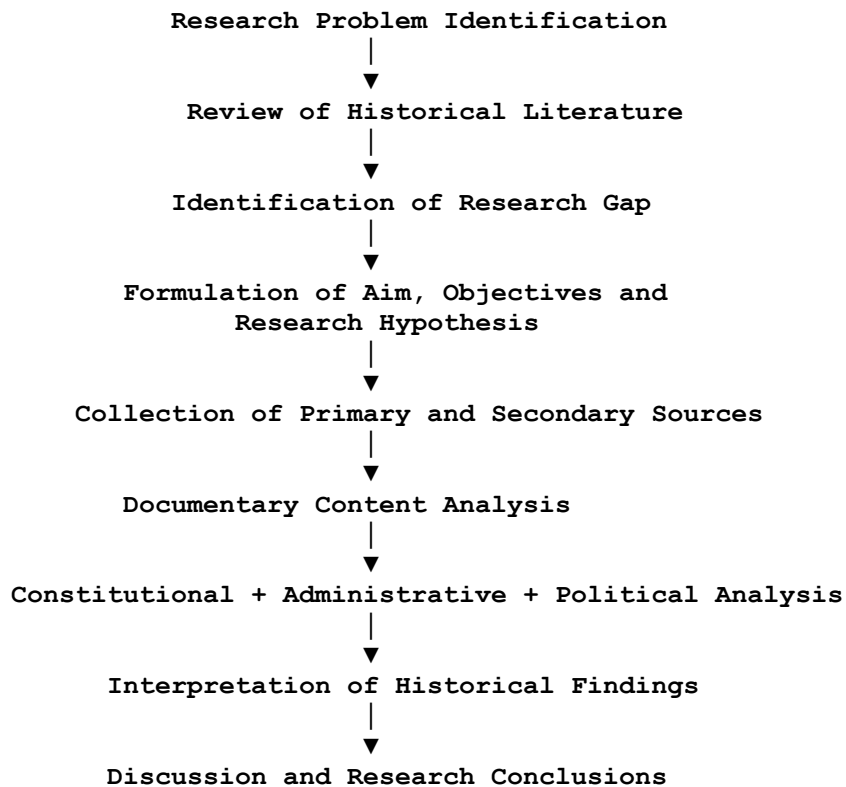
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Figure 2. Methodological Flow Chart



4. Results and Interpretation

The analysis of constitutional documents, administrative records, parliamentary debates, and nationalist writings reveals that dyarchy functioned as a limited experiment in political participation rather than a genuine transfer of executive authority. The results indicate that the reforms expanded legislative representation and introduced Indian ministers into provincial administration, but decisive control over finance, police, revenue, and law and order remained with British officials. Consequently, the structure created responsibility without adequate power and produced persistent administrative tensions.

4.1 Administrative Changes under the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms

The Government of India Act of 1919 reorganized provincial administration by dividing subjects into Reserved and Transferred categories. Reserved subjects were controlled by the Governor and his executive council, whereas transferred subjects were administered by Indian ministers responsible to provincial legislatures.



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Table 4. Administrative Changes under the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms

Administrative Sphere	Before 1919	After 1919
Finance	British Executive Control	Reserved Subject
Police	British Executive Control	Reserved Subject
Education	Limited Indian Role	Transferred Subject
Public Health	Limited Indian Role	Transferred Subject
Agriculture	Departmental Control	Transferred Subject
Legislative Representation	Restricted	Expanded

The table demonstrates that the reforms enlarged the sphere of Indian participation but retained British control over the most critical instruments of government. Since transferred departments depended heavily on financial allocations determined under reserved authority, Indian ministers frequently lacked the resources necessary to implement policy initiatives effectively.

4.2 Governance before and after Dyarchy

To assess the practical impact of dyarchy, the study compares key governance features before and after the reforms.

Table 5. Comparative Analysis of Governance before and after the Reforms

Governance Indicator	Pre-1919	Post-1919
Indian Representation	Low	Moderate
Ministerial Responsibility	Minimal	Partial
Executive Accountability	Governor Dominant	Governor Dominant
Legislative Debate	Limited	Expanded
Public Participation	Restricted	Increased but Controlled

The findings show that the reforms created a more active legislative environment and increased opportunities for political debate. However, the executive structure remained largely unchanged. Governors possessed overriding powers, including control over reserved subjects and authority to intervene when they considered provincial interests threatened. Thus, constitutional participation expanded without a corresponding transfer of sovereign executive authority.

4.3 Impact on Indian Political Participation

One of the stated objectives of the reforms was to prepare Indians for responsible government. The documentary evidence indicates that political participation increased, but dissatisfaction also grew because elected representatives encountered severe institutional limitations.

Table 6. Impact on Indian Political Participation

Political Dimension	Observed Outcome
Provincial Elections	Expanded electorate and participation
Indian Ministers	Appointed in transferred departments
Legislative Criticism	Increased questioning of government policy



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Nationalist Response	Growing distrust after Jallianwala Bagh
Demand for Self-Government	Strengthened

The evidence suggests that dyarchy unintentionally stimulated political consciousness. Participation in provincial councils exposed Indian leaders to administrative procedures while simultaneously revealing the limitations of colonial constitutionalism. This contradiction strengthened demands for fuller self-government.

5. Discussion

The results support the view that the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms represented a transitional constitutional experiment rather than a decisive move toward responsible government. The reforms enlarged representative institutions and introduced Indians into provincial administration, yet the distribution of authority ensured that the colonial executive retained ultimate control.

The post-Jallianwala context is particularly significant. Constitutional concessions were introduced at a time when public confidence in British rule had been severely damaged. Nationalist leaders increasingly interpreted dyarchy as an attempt to preserve imperial authority while offering limited political participation. This perception reduced the legitimacy of the reforms and encouraged broader demands for self-government.

Administrative evidence also reveals structural weaknesses. Indian ministers were held publicly accountable for transferred departments such as education and public health, but they lacked control over finance and senior bureaucracy. As a result, policy implementation was frequently constrained by decisions taken under reserved authority. The system therefore separated responsibility from power, creating institutional inefficiency and political frustration. Despite these limitations, the reforms had important long-term consequences. Provincial legislatures became arenas for political debate, budgetary scrutiny, and administrative criticism. Indian leaders acquired practical experience in governance, legislative procedure, and public administration. These experiences later influenced constitutional negotiations during the 1920s and 1930s and contributed to the development of parliamentary practices in independent India.

6. Conclusion

This study examined dyarchy and colonial governance in British India through the lens of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms during the post-Jallianwala Bagh era. The findings indicate that the reforms introduced limited provincial participation and expanded legislative representation, but they did not establish genuine responsible government because decisive executive authority remained with British officials.

The division between reserved and transferred subjects created administrative fragmentation, financial dependence, and conflicts between governors and Indian ministers. In the political climate created by the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, these institutional limitations intensified



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nationalist criticism and strengthened demands for self-government. Consequently, dyarchy functioned less as a democratic transfer of power and more as a mechanism for managing political participation while preserving imperial control.

Nevertheless, the reforms were historically significant. They introduced ministerial responsibility, expanded electoral politics, and exposed Indian leaders to the practical operation of government. The weaknesses revealed by dyarchy influenced later constitutional reforms, particularly the Government of India Act of 1935, and contributed to the evolution of India's democratic administrative framework. The study therefore concludes that the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms were simultaneously a limited colonial compromise and an important stage in India's constitutional development.

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