
British Legal and Administrative Reforms in India: A Comprehensive Analysis

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18641608>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 22-01-2026

Published: 10-02-2026

Keywords:

ABSTRACT

British legal and administrative reforms in India represent a complex and transformative period, fundamentally reshaping the subcontinent's governance structures. This paper examines the dual nature of these reforms: their role in establishing a modern, centralized state apparatus while simultaneously serving colonial interests of control, resource extraction, and cultural imposition. It traces the evolution of these changes from the East India Company's initial efforts to the direct rule of the British Crown post-1857, highlighting the motivations, key legislative milestones, and institutional developments. The analysis reveals how the British selectively adopted and modified indigenous systems, codified laws, restructured the judiciary, and reformed civil services and education, often under the influence of utilitarian principles. While these reforms laid the groundwork for independent India's legal and administrative framework, their inherent colonial objectives led to significant societal impacts, including cultural clashes, economic exploitation, and a system of governance designed primarily to maintain imperial dominance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The British presence in India commenced as a trading venture by the British East India Company (EIC), but it rapidly transformed into a dominant political and territorial power following decisive events such as the Battle of Plassey in 1757.¹ This expansion of influence and control across the subcontinent



necessitated the establishment of a structured legal and administrative system to consolidate authority and manage the vast newly acquired territories.¹ The reforms introduced by the British spanned over two centuries, from the late 17th century through to India's independence in 1947, profoundly reshaping the governance landscape of the region.¹

This paper posits that British legal and administrative reforms in India, while undeniably introducing elements of modern governance, uniformity, and the concept of the rule of law, were fundamentally designed to consolidate imperial power, secure economic interests, and facilitate social engineering. These changes often came at the expense of existing indigenous systems and the welfare of Indian society, embodying a dual nature where purported modernization was inextricably intertwined with pervasive colonial control. This inherent contradiction shaped both their implementation and their long-term impact on the Indian subcontinent. The British sought to firmly establish their rule in India to secure substantial capital investments made after 1850, particularly in railways and loans to the government, in the face of intensifying global economic competition.³ This objective often superseded considerations of local well-being, leading to policies that reinforced British dominance.³

2. PRE-COLONIAL LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE LANDSCAPE

Before the advent of British colonization, India possessed a diverse and intricate mosaic of legal and administrative systems. The Mughal Empire, which held sway over much of India from 1526 to 1761, was a prominent force, with justice primarily administered through a hierarchical system of courts established by emperors, regional rulers, petty chieftains, and zamindars.⁵ The Mughal judicial approach was a blend of Central Asian and Persian traditions, skillfully interwoven with local customs.⁶ The Quran served as the primary source of law, supplemented by Sunna traditions and principles of equity, with judges applying imperial decrees, known as "Qanuns" or "Shahi Farmans," and exercising discretion based on good conscience.⁶

Concurrently, in pre-existing Hindu states, indigenous legal systems derived from ancient texts such as the Vedas, Shrutis, Smritis, and Manusmriti continued to operate, often featuring detailed procedural rules and principles of evidence.⁶ Within these indigenous courts, individuals known as 'vakils' represented clients, functioning more as agents than formal lawyers.⁵ A crucial aspect of pre-colonial administration was land revenue collection, which typically involved a multi-tiered structure, with kings, jagirdars, and subordinate zamindars collecting taxes from peasants.⁸



The early British legal framework is often described as a "blend of British common law and existing Indian legal traditions".¹ For instance, the mofussil courts, established by the British in rural areas, continued to apply Hindu and Muslim laws to the indigenous population.⁵ Historical accounts also indicate that the British "adapted and preserved several parts" of the Mughal administrative system.⁶ However, this apparent hybridity was not a genuine integration of legal cultures on equal terms. Instead, it was a pragmatic and strategic co-optation. As noted by Bernard Cohn, this integration was "fraught with challenges" and often served as a "means of cultural domination".¹ The British did not genuinely synthesize these systems; rather, they selectively modified or leveraged existing indigenous legal and administrative elements to legitimize their rule and facilitate control. This approach allowed them to exploit existing structures while subtly reorienting them to serve colonial interests, leading to frequent clashes with traditional practices and an imposition of foreign values rather than a true synthesis.¹

To illustrate the foundational shifts, a comparison of the pre-colonial and early British judicial structures is presented below:

Table 1: Comparison of Pre-Colonial and Early British Judicial Structures

Category	Pre-Colonial (Mughal/Indigenous)	Early British (EIC Era pre-1773)
System	Mughal Courts, Village Panchayats, Zamindari Courts	Company Courts, Mayor's Courts (Madras, Bombay, Calcutta)
Courts	Emperor's Courts, Qazi Courts, Mufti Courts	Supreme Court of Judicature (Calcutta, 1774), Mayor's Courts (1726)
Jurisdiction	Civil & Criminal (often intertwined), over all subjects	Primarily British subjects in Presidency towns, limited over Indians
Legal Basis	Quran, Sunna, Dharmashastras, local customs, Shahi Farmans	English Common Law, Rules of Equity
Key Officials	Qazis, Muftis, Vakils, Rajas, Badshahs	Company officials, English judges



Language of Proceedings	Persian, various Vernaculars	English
Appellate Authority	Rajas/Badshahs (ultimate authority), higher Mughal courts	Appeals to the Privy Council (from 1726 for Mayor's Courts)

3. EVOLUTION OF BRITISH LEGAL REFORMS

The trajectory of British legal reforms in India can be broadly divided into distinct phases, each marked by significant legislative and institutional developments.

Early East India Company Rule (17th-18th Century)

The East India Company's transformation from a trading entity to a territorial power created an urgent need for a structured legal system to manage its expanding dominion.¹ Early British charters from the 17th century granted the EIC the authority to administer justice based on English law.⁵ Consequently, the Company established its own civil and criminal courts, known as "Company Courts," which operated alongside existing Indian dispute resolution mechanisms.⁹ A notable development was the establishment of Mayor's Courts in Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta in 1726, which functioned under English common law and rules of equity.⁵

A pivotal moment in formal legal administration was the enactment of the Regulating Act of 1773.¹ This Act led to the establishment of the Supreme Court of Judicature at Fort William in Calcutta in 1774, with similar courts later following in Madras and Bombay.¹ These Supreme Courts were empowered to try all British subjects within Calcutta and held both original and appellate jurisdictions.¹¹ Crucially, the Regulating Act of 1773 also included the first statutory provisions allowing for appeals from Indian courts to the Privy Council in London, establishing a direct link to the British legal system.¹⁴

A critical examination of this early period reveals a significant aspect of the EIC's operational framework: its inherent legal protection. Prior to 1773, the EIC benefited from what has been termed "Institutional Immunity" and "Doctrinal Immunity".⁹ This effectively placed the Company "above the law" within the very adjudicative institutions it established. The judicial system, in this context, was utilized "more as an arm of the company's power and interests rather than a viable avenue for colonized subjects to seek redress".⁹ This arrangement exposed a fundamental contradiction: while the British were



introducing the concepts of a structured legal system and English common law, implying principles of fairness and accountability, the primary governing entity itself was largely exempt from these principles when it came to harms committed against the colonized population. This protection of colonial interests at the expense of equitable justice for Indians demonstrated that the early legal framework was not primarily about universal justice but about safeguarding and facilitating colonial exploitation.

Consolidation and Codification (Late 18th - Mid 19th Century)

The late 18th and early 19th centuries saw a period of significant consolidation and the systematic codification of laws. Lord Charles Cornwallis introduced substantial reforms between 1786 and 1793, notably separating revenue administration from judicial functions.¹¹ He abolished the District Faujdari Courts, replacing them with Circuit Courts presided over by European judges, and shifted the Sadar Nizamat Adalat to Calcutta, placing it under the Governor-General and members of the Supreme Council.¹⁰ The District Diwani Adalat was redesignated as the District, City, or Zila Court, and a clear gradation of civil courts was established, ranging from Munsiff's Courts under Indian officers to the King-in-Council for high-value appeals.¹¹ Cornwallis also brought European subjects under the jurisdiction of these courts and established the principle that government officials were answerable to civil courts for their official actions, thereby laying the groundwork for the sovereignty of law.¹¹

The motivations for the extensive codification of laws were multifaceted. The British found it challenging to administer the diverse practices, norms, cultures, and customs prevalent in Indian society due to a lack of uniformity.¹⁵ Codification was seen as an "imperial project" aimed at the "uniformisation of law" and shaping Indian society in the British image.¹⁶ Thomas Babington Macaulay, a key figure in this process, was convinced that a uniform legal code was a critical instrument for transforming Indian society.¹ His goal was to create "one great and entire work symmetrical in all its parts and pervaded by one spirit," reflecting utilitarian principles.¹ Codification was also a strategic means to institute far-reaching institutional reforms indirectly, without drawing immediate attention, and to restrict the vigorous development of Indian customary law.¹⁵ The British believed that a codified system would ensure certainty in law, avoid the pitfalls of judicial legislation, prevent legal malpractice, and contribute to national unification.¹⁵ They perceived the existing linguistic, political, religious, and legal diversity as a hindrance to the consolidation of their power.¹⁶

This period saw the promulgation of landmark legislations:

- **The Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860:** Drafted under the recommendations of the first Law



Commission of India, established in 1834 under the chairmanship of Thomas Babington Macaulay, the IPC standardized criminal law across British India.¹

- **The Code of Civil Procedure (CPC) of 1859:** This legislation aimed to bring uniformity to civil procedure throughout the country. Although initially enacted in 1859, it underwent several amendments before being re-enacted in 1908, and it continues to guide the management of civil cases in India today.¹
- **The Indian Evidence Act of 1872:** This Act standardized the rules and practices related to evidence in legal proceedings.¹
- **The Indian Contract Act of 1872:** Another significant piece of legislation that formed a bedrock of the legal framework.⁵

The influence of Utilitarianism, a philosophical doctrine emphasizing the "greatest good for the greatest number," was profound in these reforms.²¹ Jeremy Bentham's ideas heavily influenced Macaulay.¹⁶ James Mill, another prominent utilitarian, justified British rule by arguing that India needed "enlightenment and progress," believing that British control would result in an "overall utility" for the Indians.²² This philosophy underpinned a paternalistic colonial governance, which sought to reform what the British branded as a "backward" Indian civilization.²² Laws were framed with the aim of promoting overall happiness or utility, albeit from a paternalistic perspective, impacting areas such as criminal justice, education, public health, and infrastructure development.²¹ However, this paternalism often involved restrictions on individual rights, leading to a perceived "loss of human warmth" in the relationship between rulers and the ruled. The utilitarian drive for a strong, efficient, and centralized administration often resulted in an almost despotic exercise of governmental power.²²

Post-1857 Reforms and Crown Rule

The Revolt of 1857 delivered a severe blow to the British administration and made its restructuring unavoidable.³ This pivotal event led to the formal transfer of governing power from the East India Company to the British Crown through the Government of India Act of 1858.² Under this Act, authority over India was transferred to a Secretary of State for India, a member of the British Cabinet directly responsible to the British Parliament. The Governor-General in India was also given the new title of Viceroy, signifying the Crown's personal representative.⁴



The reorganization of the judiciary continued under Crown rule. The Indian High Courts Act of 1861 authorized the creation of High Courts in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay in 1862, which merged the existing Supreme Courts and Sadar Adalats, establishing a unified tiered pattern of civil and criminal courts.⁵ The Privy Council in London continued to serve as the highest appellate authority for Indian courts until 1950, handling appeals from various judicial bodies, including the Mayor's Courts (from 1726) and the Supreme and Sadar Adalats.⁵ Later, the Government of India Act of 1935 provided for a Federal Court in 1937, though its jurisdiction was initially restricted primarily to constitutional matters, only significantly expanding in 1948, a year after India's independence.¹¹

The comprehensive legal system established by the British, encompassing the IPC, CPC, Evidence Act, High Courts, and the appellate role of the Privy Council, became the fundamental basis and enduring framework for the Indian legal system.¹ Even after India gained independence and adopted its own Constitution, the fundamental structures, codified laws, and common law principles introduced by the British were largely retained and adapted rather than completely discarded. This indicates a deep, lasting impact on India's legal framework, forming the basis for its modern judiciary and legal practices. The British colonial legacy left an enduring imprint on India's legal landscape, with the melding of indigenous traditions and English legal principles shaping the diverse and complex legal system that exists in the country today.⁵ The Indian judiciary's journey from traditional law to a modern institution reflects a remarkable evolution shaped by these colonial influences and subsequent indigenous reforms.¹³

4. EVOLUTION OF BRITISH ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

British administrative reforms in India evolved alongside legal changes, driven by the expanding territorial control and the need for efficient governance to maximize colonial benefits.

Early East India Company Administration (17th-18th Century)

Initially, the civil and judicial administration of the territories under the East India Company was managed through Indian diwans. However, with the arrival of Warren Hastings in 1772, the EIC assumed direct control over administration outside Calcutta.⁵ This led to the emergence of two distinct systems of courts: the *mofussil diwani adawlat* for civil justice and the *foujdary adawlat* for criminal justice.⁵ The primary focus of the EIC's administrative policies during this period was to increase its land revenue collection.⁸



Administrative Consolidation (Late 18th - Mid 19th Century)

Lord Cornwallis's administrative reforms were crucial in shaping the revenue and police systems. He divested the district collector of judicial and magisterial powers, entrusting them primarily with the duty of revenue administration.¹⁰

Land Revenue Systems: The British introduced three major land revenue systems, each with significant consequences for Indian society:

- **Zamindari System (Permanent Settlement, 1793):** Introduced by Cornwallis in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Varanasi, this system designated zamindars as landowners. They were responsible for collecting revenue, with 1/11th of the realized amount belonging to them and 10/11ths going to the EIC.⁸ This system created a new class of landlords loyal to the British, but it often led to exploitation of peasants.
- **Ryotwari System (late 18th Century):** Instituted by Sir Thomas Munro in Madras, Bombay, Assam, and Coorg, this system recognized peasants (ryots) as the owners of the land. Taxes were collected directly by the government from the peasants, with rates as high as 50% in dryland and 60% in wetland. These high, often revisable, taxes, coupled with the insistence on cash payments, led to increased indebtedness among farmers, forcing them to grow cash crops over food crops, contributing to food insecurity and famines. Moneylenders often became landowners, and bonded labor emerged as a consequence of unpayable loans.⁸
- **Mahalwari System (1822):** Introduced by Holt Mackenzie and reviewed under Lord William Bentinck in 1833, this system was prevalent in areas like the North-West Frontier, Agra, and Punjab. Land was divided into 'Mahals' (villages or groups of villages), and the tax was assessed on the Mahal, collected by the village headman. While ownership rights remained with the peasants, the village headman effectively became a zamindar. The state's share of the revenue was 66% of the rental value, with settlements agreed upon for 30 years.⁸

The overall consequences of these land revenue systems were profound: land became a commodity, private ownership was introduced where it previously did not exist, and high taxes led to widespread poverty and distress among the peasantry.²⁷



Police Reforms: Early efforts in police administration included Warren Hastings reviving the *faujdar* system in 1774, and Cornwallis forming a permanent police force in 1791, with *darogas* (Indians) heading *thanas* (circles) under the command of a Superintendent of Police (SP) at the district level.²⁸ The Indian Police Act of 1861, enacted after the 1857 Revolt, established a standardized police structure across British India, creating the Indian Imperial Police.²⁸ This force was primarily focused on maintaining law and order, which often translated to population control, repression of dissent, and protection of colonial assets.²⁹ The Act introduced concepts of hierarchy, division of labor, and centralized management, with the SP as the district police chief. Recruitment procedures became standardized, and formal training was initiated.²⁸ In 1902, the Police Commission suggested the creation of a Central Intelligence Bureau and Criminal Investigation Departments (CIDs) in each province.²⁸ Despite some professionalization, the British police system was widely criticized for its repressive and authoritarian approach, lack of public accountability, and its primary concern with protecting colonial interests rather than serving the Indian community.²⁹

Post-1857 Administrative Restructuring (Crown Rule)

The Revolt of 1857 served as a major catalyst for extensive administrative reorganization, making restructuring unavoidable to prevent future uprisings.³ Beyond the immediate need for control, the intensification of the Industrial Revolution and global economic competition after 1850 also played a significant role. Facing challenges to its dominant position, Britain sought to consolidate and extend its control over its existing empire, including India, to secure substantial British capital investments in railways, loans, plantations, mining, and trade.³ This led to a renewed surge of imperial control and an imperialist ideology, evident in the policies of Viceroys like Lytton, Dufferin, and particularly Curzon.³

Furthermore, the increasing contact with Europe and the rising Indian nationalist movement created a demand for modern improvements in civic life, such as education, sanitation, and better roads.³ The government, facing financial disorder, decided to transfer these local services to local bodies, which would finance them through local taxes. This move also served another strategic purpose: associating Indians with administration at the local level was believed to prevent political disaffection without endangering the British monopoly of power.³

The transfer of power in 1858 led to significant centralization of authority. The Secretary of State for India gained immense control, overseeing the minutest details of Indian administration, effectively reducing the Viceroy's status to a subordinate one.⁴ This centralization in London meant that Indian



opinion had even less impact on government policy. The influence of British industrialists, merchants, and bankers over the Government of India also increased, leading to a more reactionary administration.⁴ In India, the Governor-General's Executive Council was established, with members heading departments and advising the Governor-General, who retained overriding power.⁴ The Indian Councils Act of 1861 further enlarged this council for law-making purposes, creating the Imperial Legislative Council. However, this council possessed limited powers, serving merely as an advisory body that required prior government approval for discussions, had no control over the budget, and whose non-official Indian members were nominated and largely unrepresentative of Indian nationalist opinion.⁴ Subsequent legislative measures, such as the Government of India Act of 1919, expanded Indian participation through the concept of dyarchy, and the Government of India Act of 1935 allowed for a greater degree of provincial autonomy.¹²

Civil Services Reforms (ICS): The Indian Civil Service (ICS) played a critical role in shaping India's administrative architecture. Originating with the EIC's systematic framework, the British government implemented a competitive test system for civil servant recruitment in 1853, marking the first step toward merit-based selection.³⁰ After the Crown assumed control in 1858, the ICS became the bedrock of British administration.³⁰ Lord Cornwallis is often credited as the "Father of Indian Civil Service" for introducing merit-based recruitment, fixed salaries to curb corruption, and ethical standards.³¹ Lord Wellesley further initiated training for civil servants by establishing Fort William College in 1800.³¹

Initially, Indians were largely excluded from the ICS due to rigorous standards and examinations held exclusively in England, often with a curriculum biased towards European classics.³⁰ However, growing nationalist movements pushed for greater Indian participation, leading to Satyendranath Tagore becoming the first Indian to join the ICS in 1864.³⁰ The Aitchison Committee in 1886 rejected the idea of simultaneous examinations but proposed the establishment of provincial civil services.³¹ Following World War I and the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, ICS examinations began to be held in India from 1922 onwards, initially in Allahabad and then Delhi.³² The Government of India Act of 1935 provided for the establishment of federal, provincial, and joint public service commissions, giving the civil service the status of a "protected service".³¹ Post-independence, the ICS was largely superseded by the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Police Service (IPS), and Indian Forest Service, designated as All India Services by the 1950 Constitution, retaining the values of merit, efficiency, and ethics from the British structure.³⁰



Educational Reforms: British involvement in Indian education initially focused on providing basic education to the Indian elite to serve colonial administrative needs.³⁴ The Charter Act of 1813 marked the first significant step, allocating an annual sum for the promotion of education, though missionaries were also active, primarily focusing on religious education.³⁴

A transformative moment came with Lord Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" in 1835.³⁴ Macaulay advocated for English as the medium of instruction, believing Western science and literature to be superior to Indian knowledge.³⁴ He proposed focusing government funding solely on Western education and educating a select group of Indians who would then "filter down" knowledge to the masses, a concept known as the "downward filtration theory".³⁴ His aim was to create a class of Indians who would be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect," serving British interests.³⁵ Macaulay's proposals were accepted by Lord William Bentinck, leading to English becoming the court language in 1837 and high government posts being opened to Indians in 1844.³⁵

The Wood's Despatch of 1854, often referred to as the "Magna Carta of English Education in India," further regularized British efforts.³⁵ It promoted vernacular languages at the primary level, Anglo-vernacular at secondary, and English at college levels, effectively rejecting the strict downward filtration theory.³⁶ The Despatch recommended establishing separate education departments in every province, opening at least one government school in every district, providing grants-in-aid to affiliated private schools, promoting teacher training, and supporting women's education and secular education.³⁶ Consequently, universities modeled on the University of London were established in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras in 1857.³⁶ These reforms led to the rapid Westernization of the education system and the creation of an English-speaking class, primarily to serve as a workforce in the Company's administration.³⁶

5. CONCLUSION

The British legal and administrative reforms in India represent a profound and enduring chapter in the subcontinent's history. While these reforms undeniably introduced elements of a modern, centralized state apparatus, including codified laws, a structured judiciary, a professional civil service, and a Westernized education system, their fundamental purpose was to consolidate and perpetuate colonial control. The initial "hybridity" of legal systems was less a genuine integration and more a strategic co-optation, allowing the British to leverage existing structures while subtly reorienting them to serve imperial interests. The East India Company's institutional immunity from its own laws underscored a



foundational hypocrisy, revealing that the nascent legal framework was primarily designed to protect colonial exploitation rather than ensure universal justice.

The motivations for these reforms, particularly after the 1857 Revolt, were rooted in the imperative to prevent future uprisings, secure burgeoning British capital investments, and reinforce imperial ideology in the face of global economic competition. Under the influence of utilitarian thought, policies were framed with a paternalistic view of "improving" Indian society, often leading to repressive measures and a disregard for indigenous cultural practices. The introduction of new land revenue systems, such as Zamindari, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari, transformed land into a commodity, leading to widespread indebtedness, food insecurity, and the rise of exploitative practices. Similarly, police reforms, while introducing a standardized force, were primarily geared towards maintaining order and suppressing dissent rather than serving the public.

The transfer of power to the British Crown in 1858 intensified centralization, diminishing Indian influence on policy-making, even as limited Indian participation was introduced in legislative bodies as a symbolic gesture. The Indian Civil Service, though fostering merit-based recruitment, initially excluded Indians and was designed to serve colonial administrative needs. Educational reforms, epitomized by Macaulay's Minute and Wood's Despatch, aimed to create a class of Indians loyal to British rule and capable of assisting in administration, profoundly shaping the intellectual and professional landscape.

In synthesizing this analysis, it becomes clear that British reforms were instrumental in shaping the institutional framework of modern India. The codified laws, the hierarchical judicial structure, the administrative machinery, and the educational system laid a foundational blueprint that independent India largely inherited and adapted. However, this legacy is inherently contested, built upon a history of cultural imposition, economic exploitation, and a system of governance designed to maintain an "alien despotism".⁴ The enduring impact is thus a complex interplay of modernization and colonial subjugation, where the structures of governance that persist today carry the indelible marks of their imperial origins.

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