

Doctrine of Lapse - NCERT Notes for UPSC Modern Indian History

The Doctrine of Lapse was an annexation policy followed widely by Lord Dalhousie when he was India's Governor-General from 1848 to 1856. It was used as an administrative policy for the extension of British Paramountcy. Important for IAS Exam, aspirants should know the facts about the Doctrine of Lapse from prelims and mains perspectives.

This article will introduce the Doctrine of Lapse along with its features and names of the states annexed under the policy.

Who was Lord Dalhousie & What is the Doctrine of Lapse?

James Andrew Broun-Ramsay, 1st Marquess of Dalhousie, known commonly as Lord Dalhousie, was the Governor-General of India from 1848 to 1856. He had been a famous Scottish statesman.

Now, although he is commonly associated with the Doctrine of Lapse, it was devised by the Court of Directors of the East India Company as early as 1847 and several smaller states had already been annexed under this doctrine before Lord Dalhousie took the position of the Governor-General. The policy was used far more extensively by him to expand the territorial reach of the East-India Company.

The Doctrine of Lapse was an annexation policy extensively applied by East India Company in India until 1859. The doctrine stated that any princely state under the vassalage of the company will have its territory annexed should the ruler of the said state fail to produce an heir. The doctrine and its application were regarded by many Indians as illegitimate.

The Doctrine of Lapse was one of the underlying factors that led to the revolt of 1857.

Features of Doctrine of Lapse

Before the introduction of this doctrine, the princely states had a ritualised method of adoption practised for centuries. An heir apparent would eventually be selected from a pool of candidates, who were groomed for succession from an early age, called bhayats if no competent born-to son were produced (an obviously unsuitable or treasonous born-to son could be excluded from the succession).

If the ruler died before adopting a successor, one of his widows could adopt an heir, who would immediately accede to the throne. The adoptee would cut all ties with his birth family. Once the Doctrine of Lapse came into place the following features were now faced by the Indian rulers.

- According to this doctrine, any princely state under the direct or indirect (as a vassal) control of the East India Company, should the ruler not produce a legal male heir, would be annexed by the company.
- This was not introduced by Lord Dalhousie even though it was he who documented it and used it widely to acquire territories for the British.
- As per this, any adopted son of the Indian ruler could not be proclaimed as heir to the kingdom. The adopted son would only inherit his foster father's personal property and estates.
- The adopted son would also not be entitled to any pension that his father had been receiving or to any of his father's titles.
- This challenged the Indian ruler's long-held authority to appoint an heir of their choice.

The Doctrine of Lapse - States Annexed

The states that were annexed under this policy are given below in chronological order:

States Annexed by Doctrine of LapseYear of Annexation

Jaintia	1803
Kozhikode	1806
Guler	1813
Kannanur	1819
Kittur	1824
Kutlehar	1825
Kodagu	1834
Kangra	1846
Satara	1848
Jaitpur	1849

Sambalpur	1849
Baghat	1850
Udaipur	1852
Jhansi	1853
Nagpur	1854

In 1824, before the time of Dalhousie, the princely state of Kittur was acquired by the East India Company by this doctrine.

- It was as per this policy that Nana Sahib, the adopted son of the Maratha Peshwa Baji Rao II was denied his titles and pension.
- The final moment straw came when **Awadh** was annexed to the English East India Company under the terms of the **Doctrine of Lapse** on the grounds of internal misrule on 7 February 1856 AD. This annexation was one of the reasons for the Revolt of 1857.

Effects of Doctrine of Lapse

- Many Indian states lost their sovereignty and became British territories.
- This led to a lot of unrest among the Indian princes.
- A lot of people were unhappy with the 'illegal' nature of this doctrine and this was one of the causes of the Indian Revolt of 1857.
- Nana Sahib and the Rani of Jhansi had grievances against the British because the former's pension was stopped by the British after his foster father died, and the Rani's adopted son was denied the throne under the doctrine of lapse.
- Dalhousie returned to Britain in 1856. After the Indian Revolt broke out in 1857, his governance was widely criticised as one of the causes of the rebellion.