



District Administration: As a Coordinating Unit of Service Delivery

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Abstract

District as a unit of Administration has been one of the important institutional legacies bequeathed by the British to India. As a unit of the administrative system it has been a pivotal point of contact between the citizen and the administration. The purpose of district administration appears to be, firstly, to maintain law and order besides a state of peace. Secondly, the district administration exists to ensure that justice may be done and that the rule of law shall prevail and to protect the fundamental rights of the citizen as set out by the constitution. This article deals with the historical understanding of district administration and how district works as a coordinating Unit of Service Delivery through Municipalities and panchayati raj with monitoring of developmental functions.

Key Words: Administration, Service Delivery, District

Introduction

Administrative history of India has insisted upon a central role for a 'district' in local governance activities. The Oxford Concise Dictionary defines a district as a territory marked off for special administrative purposes. To quote the same dictionary, administration is the management of public affairs. Thus, district administration 'is the management of public affairs within the territory marked off for the purpose.'¹ The basic territorial unit of administration in India is the district, and 'district administration' so we say that district administration is 'the total management of public affairs within the unit.'² It is at this level that the common man comes into direct contact with the administration. District administration in India deals with a wide embracive sphere of total management of public affairs. It is this wide embracive nature of district administration which is particular significance in the study of public administration in India. District administration in this country includes a very wide spectrum indeed of public administration. It is that portion of public administration which functions in the territorial limits of a district.

Historical Perspective of District Administration

The Constitution of India, which deals with all kinds of territorial delimitation and jurisdictions, makes no mention at all of a district as a unit of administration. There is indeed one reference in the Constitution, in article 233, to the appointment of district judges, but no other mention at all about the district. And none at all about district administration, or the district magistrate and collector about whom one hears so much as the pivot of all governmental functions in the district³.

Historically the district, in some form or the other has been the most important unit of administration in the Indian sub-continent. The Mauryas who build up their imperial

¹ Khera, S.S. (1979), *District Administration in India*, New Delhi, p.75.

² Maheshwari, S.R. (2004), *Indian Administration*, New Delhi, p.573.

³ Khera, S.S. (1979), *District Administration in India*, New Delhi, p.77.

system in the country, where the first to constitute a 'district' as the most prominent territorial unit and to centralise its administration with all powers concentrated in a single officer called 'Rajuka' at its hierarchic apex. In ensuring the safety of their empire the Mauryas forged a direct link between the rajuka and imperial home-cum-finance minister. All the succeeding imperial power- the Guptas, the Mughals and the British- invariably adopted the territorial patterns evolved by the Mauryas and made the district indeed a sub-state which accorded a local finality to the overwhelming majority of the people for their living. The evolution of district administration in Mughal times and those of the East India Company has to be understood in light of the fact that neither had a legislative wing. Executive commands originated from the Emperor or the Governor General, or from the provincial governors, and were executed by the sub provincial authorities, howsoever designated. The British Parliament was the first legislature in respect of India in modern times and enactments created and gave substance to the district head of administration, known variously as the Collector (in respect of revenue administration), the District Magistrate (in respect of administration of criminal justice) or the Deputy Commissioner (in respect of General Administration and special functions / powers under local tenancy laws.⁴ At the time of Akbar, there was a similar demarcation by district. The district was described as a 'sarkar', a term which is significant. Although it comes to be spelt during the British period as 'circa', it really is 'sarkar', and it was literally, the government in its total manifestation, in a conveniently demarcated geographical units. The same pattern prevailed in the British period particularly in the so called British India, where the district formed the unit of field administration. And now in independent India, we find that the district continues to prevail as the principal unit of field administration.⁵

The district administration has been one of the important institutional legacies bequeathed by the British to India. According to some writers the British only built up from the elements of the system as had been prevailing in the country then. As a unit of the administrative system it has been a pivotal point of contact between the citizen and the administration. Despite the changed ecology of the administrative system, the importance of this unit has not in any way diminished today. The district administration has even assumed greater significance in the light of the growing emphasis on development planning and the implementation of welfare and development programmes through a process of democratic decentralization.

In British time

The British had laid a great deal of emphasis on district administration. It was designed by them in a manner so as to bring the totality of the government nearer to the people. The institution of district collector was created with a view to continue the traditional system of over-lordship in an administrative jurisdiction. As the realization of revenue and the maintenance of law and order were the dominant concern of British regime, the district collector was not only 'the pivot of administration combining revenue, magisterial and general administrative duties', but was also deemed to be absolutely essential for maintaining the British power, influence and

⁴ 15th report of second ARC report (2005), New Delhi, p.57.

⁵ Khera, S.S. (1979), *District Administration in India*, New Delhi, p.78.

authority throughout the country⁶. With independence and the consequent change in the nature of the duties of a district officer relating to development, planning and nation-building activities, and the system of administration at the district level faced a greater challenge. Such challenges were reflected at least in two different directions. First, the large scale expansion of the administrative activities at the district level resulted in the growth of the functional and technical departments and units necessitating diverse specialized and technical human skills and resources. Second, the district collector would now have to function within the framework of a parliamentary democratic system and along with local institutions like Panchayat Raj, other local government bodies, cooperatives and others which had come into existence in the wake of the adoption of the ideals of a welfare state, democratic decentralization, and the need for development at the grass root level. These changes have brought the system face to face with a large number of politicians and a variety of political factors, challenging the traditional homogeneity of the district administrator and the authority of district collector. As noted by a group of scholars the system of administration at the district level passed from an 'integrated stage' into a 'differentiated' stage.⁷

In Present Day

District administration includes all the agencies of the government, the individual's officials and functionaries, a public servant who is a government servant and equally one who is not. For the term public servant includes many who are not government servants as such which includes all institutions for the management of public affairs in the district; all the bodies corporate such as the panchayats of different kinds, the gram sabhas, the naya panchayats (which are a court of law), the panchayat samitis, the zila parishads, municipal committees and local boards of every kind. It includes all advisory bodies associated with the administration, as well as individuals serving in such a way as assessors and jurors in the trial of cases. There may be an advisory committee for instance, to advise the district magistrate in the issuing of arms licences in the district; or an advisory committee for the selection of honorary magistrates, and indeed for many other purposes.⁸ The district is, thus, a multiple one, having a galaxy of officers for administering the affairs of the government. District administration provides the principal points of contact between the citizen and the processes of government. It is truly the cutting edge of the tool of public administration; and in this is what constitutes its vital significance in the nation's government.

The district is the most vital administrative sub division of the state. It plays a most significant role in the administration are based on the district- law and order, revenue, judicial, medical and local. Broadly speaking, in the district, there are two types of functions in operation⁹ (1) function performed on behalf of the state such as revenue collection, law and order, executive function, and (2) functions which are purely local nature. There are several types of districts. By far the largest number are of the type one would call rural districts. The average district in India has been, and continues to be, on the whole a rural district. Secondly there are districts where the local

⁶ Jain.R.B. (1980), *District Administration*, Delhi, p.8.

⁷ Ishwar Dayal, Kuldeep Mathur and M.Bhattacharya (1976), *District Administration*, Delhi, p.2.

⁸ Khera,S.S. (1979), *District Administration in India*, New Delhi, p.79.

⁹ Sharma, Bhagwan Jai (2003), *History and Problems of District Administration in India*, New Delhi, p.235.

administration has to concentrate more on urban areas, and on urban problems. Delhi is the best example of this. There is a district of Delhi with its district officer, the deputy commissioner. Although his jurisdiction covers many villagers, most of his work and most of the problems with which he and his staff have to deal arose in urban areas. Thirdly, there are districts which described as an industrial district, areas which are heavily industrialized. This is characteristic of some part of Bihar and West Bengal. In such districts there is a comparatively high degree of industrialization, and the district administration has to deal with problems which do not occur so frequently in the rural district. Then districts which are rather backward, where the local people have not had the same opportunities or advantages, as the more developed areas. Finally, there are the hill districts, where the people and the pattern of living, and also the pattern of local administration are different from the districts in the plain. Of course, there are numbers of districts which are a mixture of these different types.¹⁰

District Administration as a Unit of Service Delivery and Monitor of Developmental functions

The purpose of district administration appears to be, firstly, to maintain law and order besides a state of peace. Secondly, the district administration exists to ensure that justice may be done and that the rule of law shall prevail.¹¹ To protect the fundamental rights of the citizen as set out by the constitution, anything that is or tends to be contrary to these has no place in public administration in India, and in the administration of the district. For instance, we have a rule that every citizen is entitled to be protected, in some modern and so called civilized societies.¹² The functions of the district administration in India may be grouped, although somewhat loosely, into a number of fairly broad categories. We may distinguish some of the broad groups of functions¹³. The first group, necessarily concern the public safety and the protection of citizen and of all his rights. It includes the maintenance of law and order and the administration of criminal and civil justice. A second group may be called the revenue and excise group. Revenue and excise go together, and are concerned with the assessment and collection of taxes and duties of different kinds. Revenue includes quite a number of items. It includes land revenue, irrigation dues, income tax, agricultural income-tax where it is levied, sales tax, stamps, court fees, excise duties of various kinds, entertainment taxes and others. In the same group of revenue and excise we might also include the government treasury. The treasury officer works under the control of district officers, and forms part of the district administration. Another group consists of agriculture (which is the major industry in the average district, and certainly the largest single industry in practically every district), irrigation, and industries. These form part of the economic group of administrative functions. Then we have a whole group, which we may term generally the welfare and development function. Some of them are economic also, which include community development, with which we are familiar, co-operatives, public health, education, social welfare, Panchayati Raj and others.

¹⁰ Khera, S.S. (1960), *District Administration in India*, New Delhi, p.4.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Khera, S.S. (1979), *District Administration in India*, New Delhi, p.92.

¹³ Ibid.

The district administration is also concerned with the running of all elections for the Parliament, to the state legislature and to the local bodies. There is usually a district electoral officer. The collector of the district is responsible for the proper conduct of the election process, with the help of the staffs which he very often draws from all the other departments in the district. Usually at election time a notice from the government goes out to all departments just before the election asking them to spare a many officials as may be needed, to act as polling officers or returning officer or in other ways to participate in the conduct of the elections. The next group with which the district administration is concerned is local self-government. Finally, the district administration exercises the undefined executive functions of government i.e., a residuary term.

After independence, developmental functions were allocated to the district. The colonial legacy of routine law and order administration along with the associated personnel system and the work procedure was found unsuitable for the accomplishment of global task of nation-building and programmatic goals fulfilment. The administrative institutions and procedures belonging to the old colonial regime were meant for different purposes: to preserve and perpetuate a system of colonial domination. These were not accountable to legislative bodies or to popular representatives at different levels. It was none of the concern of colonial administration to bring about all round agricultural and industrial development. Removal of social and economic inequality and correcting regional economic imbalances were not the objective of imperial administration. Revenue extraction, export of raw material, minimum essential public services and law and order maintenance constituted the sum total of imperial rule of the colonies. Security and extraction being the prime concern of the regime, the colonial public administrative system had essentially been centralized, suspicion-ridden and authoritarian. In the post-colonial phase, distinguishing mark of development administration, by contrast, was its focus on the management of 'development'. As an aspect of public administration, it stood for definite and planned institutional capacity to accomplish the specific goals of development through the formulation of appropriate policies, programmes and projects and their successful implementation. It was not mechanical efficiency of scientific management brand that was at the core of development administration. Participative, responsive and accountable management constituted the essence of development administration¹⁴. The management process had to enlist popular support and involvement; it had to respond to popular needs and demands; and it was ultimately accountable to the people and the popular representatives.

District and Panchayati Raj: Sharing Local Concerns of Development

In the regime of the Prime Minister P.V.Narasimha Rao, the Seventh-fourth (74th) Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 was passed on 20th April 1993. This Amendment became operative in April 1993 by introducing a new part, namely Part IXA in the Constitution which deals with matters relating to urban government. It is entitled as 'The Municipalities' and consist of provisions from articles 243-P to 243-ZG¹⁵. In addition, the Act has also added Twelfth Schedule to the Constitution. It

¹⁴ Bhattacharya.M. (1997), *Development Administration*, New Delhi, p.2.

¹⁵ Bakshi.P.M. (2004), *The Constitution of India*, Delhi, p.205.

contains 18 functional items of municipalities and deals with Article 243-W. This Act gave the Constitutional status to the municipalities. This Act aims at revitalising and strengthening the urban governments so that they function effectively as a unit of local government. This act gives the power to the municipalities in respect of preparation of plans for economic development and social Justice and for implementing of schemes as may be entrusted to them. Constitutional Amendment envisages that municipalities would go beyond the mere provision of civic amenities. They are expected now to play a crucial role in the preparation of plans for local development and in the implementation of development projects and programmes including those specially designed for urban poverty alleviation. The list of the 18 functions performed by the municipalities' deals with Article 243-W which empowers the local people are as follows¹⁶:

1. Urban planning including town planning.
2. Regulation of land-use and construction of the building.
3. Planning for economic and social development.
4. Road and bridges.
5. Water supply for domestic, industrial and commercial purposes.
6. Public health, sanitation, conservancy and solid waste management.
7. Fire services.
8. Urban forestry, protection of the environment and promotion of ecological aspects.
9. Safeguarding the interest of the weaker section of the society, including the handicapped and the mentally retarded.
10. Slum improvement and up gradation.
11. Urban poverty alleviation.
12. Provision of urban amenities and facilities such as parks, gardens, playgrounds.
13. Promotion of cultural, educational and aesthetic aspects.
14. Burials and burial grounds; cremations, cremation ghats/grounds and electric crematoria.
15. Cattle pounds; prevention of cruelty to animals.
16. Vital statistics including the registration of births and deaths.
17. Public amenities including street lighting, parking lots, bus stop and public conveniences.
18. Regulation of slaughter houses and tanneries.

For discharging these functions, planning and allocation of resources at the district level there is a 'district planning committee' under article 243-ZD.

Another landmark decision taken by the government of India in 1993 for promoting the de-centralization was by passing the seventy-third (73rd) constitutional amendment act 1992 entitled as 'The Panchayat' consists from articles 243 to 243-O¹⁷, added Part-IX and Eleventh schedule in the constitution of India. It contains 29 functional items of the Panchayats deals with article 243-G. This act gives the powers the Panchayati Raj bodies are extensive and the list includes farming, land reform,

¹⁶ Maheshwari.S.R. (2004), *Local Government in India*, Agra, p. 221.

¹⁷ Bakshi.P.M. (2004), *The Constitution of India*, Delhi, p.211.

ecological restoration, rural industries etc. they make local development plans. The Panchayati Raj bodies are empowered to take decisions in 29 clearly defined subjects all concerning their day to day lives. Their role in the field of implementation is much more pronounced. They are the implementing agency of the state government. The functions conferred on Panchayati Raj institutions are the following¹⁸:

1. Agriculture, including agriculture extension.
2. Land improvement, implementation of land reforms, land consolidation and soil conservation.
3. Minor irrigation, water management and water shade development.
4. Animal husbandry, dairying and poultry.
5. Fisheries.
6. Social forestry and farm forestry.
7. Minor forest produce.
8. Small scale industries, including food processing industries.
9. Khadi, village and cotton industries.
10. Rural housing.
11. Drinking water.
12. Fuel and fodder.
13. Roads, culverts, bridges, fairies, water ways and other means of communication.
14. Rural electrification, including distribution of electricity.
15. Non-conventional energy sources.
16. Poverty alleviation programmes.
17. Education including primary and secondary schools.
18. Technical training and vocational education.
19. Adult and non-formal education.
20. Libraries.
21. Cultural activities.
22. Market and fares.
23. Sanitation, including hospitals, primary health centers and health dispensaries.
24. Family welfare.
25. Women and child development.
26. Social welfare, including welfare of the handicap and mentally retarded.
27. The welfare of weaker sections and in particular of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.
28. Public distribution system.
29. Maintenance of community assets.

Panchayati Raj was introduced in India with high expectations. It was viewed as the important step towards decentralized democracy. No such hopes have been fulfilled. These constitutions have remained starved of functions and resources. In the west they have served as the implementation agency of the state government, contend to implement schemes handed down by the state government. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment was expected to change the character and status of the Panchayati Raj. The Constitutional incorporation of the eleventh schedule of functions has aroused

¹⁸ Maheshwari.S.R. (2004), *Local Government in India*, Agra, p.173.

great hope. But Panchayati Raj institutions have sadly remained pale and different in resources to this day. They have not been given autonomy over any the eleventh schedule function. Nor do they have assured financial resources at their command. Even today they are by and large part of the delivery system of the state government. In short, the expectations that the Panchayati Raj would become the Constitutions of self government continue to be a mirage.

Conclusion

Thus the district administration is one of the most important apparatus of service delivery for citizens and characteristics of Indian Administrative System. It has been the oldest institution in Indian Administration. The present form of district administration is a British creation. The main components of district administration are; law and order, administration of police, jails and justice, administration of land revenue, local bodies, education planning and community development, etc. District administration has been sought to be recognized to ensure better micro level plans and ground level project implementation and monitoring. The Balvantray study team had a look at district administration and recommended Panchayati Raj parallel to district administration this enshrined third-tier of 'District Government'.¹⁹

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