

Chapter - II

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION : ITS CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

Section-A : Evolution of District Administration

The legacy of history and the administrative compulsions resulting from the large size of the states, combine to sub-divide the whole territory of the country into small viable administrative units, called districts. Each district in itself is a complete administrative whole in the sense that almost all state level department which cater to the manifold needs of the people, establish their branches here. The district administration, thus, presents the look of a mini-secretariat, supporting such departments as: development, social welfare, education, health, agriculture, forests, co-operation, engineering, police, revenue, taxation, etc. The district level heads of these departments function under the overall supervision and direction of the district chief, who is variously designated as deputy commissioner or district collector. The district administration forms, the base from where all essential services are provided to the community. Originally, it was created by the British to serve their limited ends. But over the years, it has become the supporting base for the whole superstructure of the administrative hierarchy of the government. It is this agency upon which the higher echelons of the government put their main reliance not only for catering to the vital needs of the people but also for the execution of all important programmes of socio-economic development of the nations¹.

The basic form of the district as a unit of administration has a remarkable continuity. In Manu's time about a thousand villages formed a district; it was in charge of a separate official. The present form of district administration, however, is more akin to the Moryan era. The Mughals also based their system of administration almost on the Moryan lines. During the Mughal administration, there were three officers in the district. First, there was the Amalguzar his main duty was the collection and management of government revenues. Secondly, there was the Razi or the chief civil judicial officer in the district. Thirdly, in the faujdar, or police magistrate, the main executive functions of the district were vested. After the dissolution Mughal Empire, the East India Company created the office of Collector in 1772 and gave more powers than what his counterpart had in Mughal times. The institution of the Collector underwent certain changes in the succeeding years though he did remain a strong

connecting link between the people and the government and continued to be the head of the district administration performing the dual role of the lower courts and the police works. Cornwallis, insisted on the separation of the judicial from executive function in district administration. The Collector in Bengal, under Cornwallis, was diverted of his judicial functions and he was left solely in charge of collection of public dues. In his place, the main figure in the district was the district judge and Magistrate. Under the Munro system the collector acquired greater responsibility because land revenue was not permanently settled. The period that followed the Mutiny in 1857, was one of comparative peace and was devoted to the unification of the country. The prolific legislative activities of the government of the India during this period, helped to establish the rule of law throughout the country. Naturally this tended to cut down the executive discretionary powers of the district officer. The responsibility of the entire gamut of administration in the district instead of being concentrated in one officer, namely, the collector, was now divided amongst a number of heads of departments, nearly all of whom looked to their provincial headquarters for orders and guidance.

The constitutional reforms of 1921 placed the control of some department in the hands of Ministers, who are responsible to a council and an elected legislature. While on the one hand, this resulted in a further narrowing of the field of activities of the collector and of his influence, on the other, it strengthened departmental heads in whose activities the minister was directly interested and for which he was responsible to the legislature.

District administration under the dyarchy was called upon to function in a way somewhat different from before. A number of matters were also handed over more fully to the charge of the local institutions of self-government, such as district boards. These included, again in a limited way, education, health, the minor roads and works, etc. Also, as an incident of the division of political powers under the system of dyarchy, the separate departmental lines began to be established increasingly².

In spite of the division of political and administrative powers and responsibilities under dyarchy, the residuary representation, the total presence of government as a whole continued within the old apparatus of the district administration. This apparatus also provided the main line of communication between the local self-governing institutions, such as, the district boards, the municipal committees, the town boards and soon on the

one hand, and the provincial government on the other. The District Magistrate was also invested with certain Powers of supervision, and with some minor sanctions to make his influence felt in the working of these institutions. The divisional commissioner also had somewhat larger powers, and in some cases a certain amount of effective overseeing was achieved. But, by and large, the local institutions of self-government tended to form administrative isolates within the district administration as a whole. This situation led to the collector of the district becoming increasingly the co-ordinating rather than of the unifying agency for the different departmentalised and other components of the district administration³.

The introduction of provincial autonomy in 1937 was another landmark in the history of district administration. Whereas till that time, the district officer as the representative of government, had to concentrate on essentials like maintenance of public order, administration of justice, prompt payment of taxes, maintenance of accurate and up-to-date land records, the emphasis now changed to rural development, cooperation, village panchayats etc. Each specialist activity was under the charge of separate officer, who looked to his departmental head, and through him to the minister for guidance and orders. The pattern of district administration was, therefore, taking on a different colour; from his traditional functions, the district officer now had to interest himself in entirely new activities like rural development. New dimensions were added to these functions with the start of the second world war by including activities like recruitment for armed forces, arranging provision for troops, looking after the families of soldiers, and sailors, collecting war funds and certain measures of civil defence. With the dawn of independence, these functions have grown and included almost all activities which touch upon the welfare of the people. On the eve of independence, in 1947, the collector had become something of a “jack of all trades”. When we contemplate the social and economic administration in the district one finds that great changes have been taking place since in independence.

There has been an increasing sense of the need of the people’s participation in the administrative process, in the economic and social administration of the district. In respect of economic and social administration, a clear momentous changes, began to take place, compared with the state of things before independence.

After independence, the state switched over to the requirements of a welfare state. There is indeed a greater awareness on the part of the citizen about his place in

the order of things; of his rights as well as of his responsibilities. Where formerly the apparatus for the maintenance of law and order on the whole stood on one side, with the body of citizens on the other, now the apparatus has to function amongst the people and as part of the community, and indeed can only function effectively with the support and even participation of the people. This indeed is part of the change.

Development has become a major focus of administrative activity in India. The process of development consists of bringing about structural and behavioural change in the social, economic and political life of the people. Development administration, as a concept connotes, the totality of administrative processes involved in developmental activities.

Rural Development has acquired special significance in the third world nations. It is observed that more than half the people in these nations live in the villages. In the Pre-independence era of these countries, the rural areas were neglected by the colonists. This resulted in the mammoth growth of urban centres at the expense of the rural areas. The disproportionate development of the rural areas to a variety of problems requiring prompt attention⁴.

Rural development is defined specifically as a strategy to improve the economic and social life of a specific group of people, the rural poor. It involves extending the benefits of development to the poorest among those who seek a livelihood in rural areas. The group includes small scale farmers, tenants and the landless⁵. Thus among many objective and prerequisites of rural development important ones may be enlisted as; improving the living standard or well-being of the people ensuring them security and providing basic needs, making the rural areas more productive and less vulnerable to national hazards, poverty and exploitation, giving them mutually beneficial relationship with other parts of the regional, national and international economy and ensuring that development therein is and self-sustaining, involving the mass of people with little disruption of traditional customs and administrative decentralisation.

After independence the first rural development effort was Community Development programme in 1952. It was a multi-purpose programme developed on the Etawa Pilot Project. The major concern was to build up a strong rural community complete with infrastructure and communication so that rural masses could be brought in line with the urban communities and participate effectively in the political life of

the nation. During the operation of the programme basic amenities like roads, school buildings and community centres came up which helped in psychological rehabilitation of the villages in the eyes of the villagers. It also created a development bureaucracy down to the village level.”It was the first service-oriented programme whereas the administrative system of the country was firmly rooted in the basic law and order culture⁶. To quote Rajni Kothari, India’s leading political scientist on the subject, “despite all the defects of the Community Development Movement and its largely bureaucratic character, there did indeed take place considerable development of the countryside, at least in terms of laying out a vast infrastructure of welfare services, cooperatives and voluntary organisation “⁷.

What is more, that period was also characterised by significant transfer of resources from urban to rural areas which to no small extent contributed to a steady relationship between two sectors. This was also the period when political power shifted to the rural areas, thanks largely to the electoral process and the permeation of competitive polities, and gave rise to substantial articulation of rural needs and interests even though this still left out the very poor and the underprivileged.

There is the idea of that democratic decentralization is a more effective way of meeting local needs than central planning. If centralization is the systematic and consistent reservation of authority of at central points within the organisation, decentralization applies to the systematic effort to delegate to the lower levels all authority except that which can only be exercised at central points. In other words, when delegation is consistently and systematically practised, it constitutes decentralization⁸.

Decentralized planning is something which comes not from outside or above but from below the state level, i.e., from the districts, blocks and even villages. The concept of decentralized planning is not a new one in India. Though the need for strengthening the planning machinery at different levels-states, districts and blocks-was emphasised both in the Third and in the Fourth Five Year Plan.

District planning is a major step in the direction of decentralized planning, the case for which for a country of the size and diversity of India is too obvious to require such elaboration. District level planning is expected to result in better planning because the local people have a better awareness of their needs and fuller information on the

conditions and possibilities of their areas. District planning would obviously become more meaningful in the process of decentralization is carried forward to lower levels like the block, mandal and the village. However, it would take time before viable mechanisms at these levels can be created. Hence the focus of attention for the time being has to be on district.

The idea of decentralization of the planning process below the State level has featured consistently in all the five year plans. Of course the emphasis has varied. The First Five Year Plan for instance, talked about breaking the national and state plans into local units based on district, town and villages⁹.

The Community Development Programme was the first experiment in this regard. The Community Development Blocks were established and an infrastructure was created at the block level for integration of the administrative and development functions.

During the Second Five Year Plan, two important steps were introduced. On the one hand, there was talk of village plans and District Development Councils. On the other hand, there was the idea of the popular participation through the process of democratic decentralization. It was clearly stated that district would be the pivot of the structure of democratic planning. In emphasizing planning at the district level and below, the objective was to carry the district and state plans as close to the people as possible to make three plans as means of solving the pressing problems of each local area and through local community participation and cooperative self-help, to augment the total effort and provide greater scope for local initiative and leadership¹⁰.

In the course of its review of plan projects, the Balwant Rai Mehta committee recommended decentralization of administration and democratization of power. Its main objectives, according to Jawaharlal Nehru, the First Prime Minister of our country, are to bring about a change in the mental outlook of the people, install in them an ambition for higher standards of life and the will and determination to work for such standards, it seeks to "build up the community and the individual and to make the latter a builder of his own village centre and of India in the larger sense¹¹.

Accepting the scheme proposed by Balwantrai Mehta, the central council of local self government rightly observed and recommended: "while the broad pattern and the fundamentals may be uniform there should not be any rigidity in the pattern. In fact, the

country is so large and panchayati raj is so complex a subject with far reaching consequence, that there is the fullest scope of trying out various patterns and alternatives. What is more important is the genuine transfer of power to the people. If this is ensured, form and pattern may necessarily vary according to conditions prevailing in different states."¹²

The committee recommended, as a way out, the formation of a hierarchic three-tier system of rural local government to be called Panchayati Raj. The three tiers are the Gram Panchayat (village level), Panchayat Samiti (intermediate level), and Zilla Parishad (district level).

After acceptance of these recommendation by the National Development Council, the state legislatures passed legislation to create these bodies in their states. Different States created different types of Structures keeping in view the existing Structure as well as the requirements of the States. These legislations provided for development of districts as their main duty and simultaneously these bodies were given enough powers not only to raise resources but also to requisition the machinery at the district and lower levels to implement Panchayati Raj Institution (PRIS) development plans.

In the Third Five Year Plan it was envisaged that the block plan would include all social and economic activities undertaken within the block which call for: (a) planning initiated locally at the block and village levels, and (b) coordination with plans of various departments which are implemented within the block. But this idea could not be operationalised because of lack of adequate planning machinery at either district or block levels.

The importance of district and local planning was again highlighted during the Fourth Five Year Plan period and it was thought that with successive annual plans, district planning in the States should become more general and detailed and a coordinated programme in various directions should be involved. It was also said that state plans will be successful only if they are formulated in relation to physical features, resources and institutional organizations in each area. Thus, reduction of regional disparities as one of the objectives of district planning was added during this period.

During the same period, three significant developments took place. First, the banks were nationalized and given responsibilities in the massive programme of rural

development. Second, a new concept of integrated area development came up during this period and a large number of research studies were undertaken in different parts of the world and India could not remain unaffected by this new development. According to this new concept, growth centres were to be established. After identification of these centre, Action Plans were prepared for their development. Pilot experimentation of this type was undertaken in many states of the Indian Union . Third, many area specific and beneficiary oriented programmes were introduced such as CADA, DDA, HADA, TDA, DPAP, SFDA, MFAL etc. These area specific Programmes were implemented by special agencies created for this purpose. These were, by and large, centrally sponsored programmes on a sharing basis and operated at the district or area level independent of each other.

A change of Government came at the national level in 1977. The new Government realised that the Five Year Plans did not make much impact on the poor as well as backward regions. Successful implementation of anti-poverty programmes and backward regions required systematic identification of really poor and formulation of appropriate programmes for them. This required door to door and village to village survey. This kind of survey and formulation of programmes for them could not be done at the district level. Hence, block was identified as the appropriate level having adequate size planning and implementation. In the opinion of working group under the Chairmanship of M.L. Dantwall, block level planning was not to be viewed as an isolated exercise but as a link in the hierarchy of level from a cluster of villages below the block level to the district, regional and state levels.

During the same period, another Committee, headed by Ashok Mehta, was appointed to enquire into the working of the Panchayati Raj Institutions and to suggest measures to strengthen them so as to enable the decentralized system of planning and development to be effective.

The Sixth Five Year Plan again highlighted the importance of block level planning for eradication of poverty through provision of gainful employment opportunities to the poorest of the poor. Thus, block level planning became only a single-point programme of employment generation and it in no way reflected the integrated area development plan. In the year 1983, the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council(EAC) consulted that there were clear limits to planning at the district level and a district

could be too small a unit for planning some of the infrastructure facilities. It, therefore, suggested a cluster of four districts an average as a level of decentralized planning.

The planning commission again set up a working group on district planning under the chairmanship of C.H.Hanumantha Rao. It made detailed recommendations on all the aspects of district planning and hoped that the Report would stimulate district planning activity in the states enabling them to adopt the “stages approach” to district planning and to prepare specific guidelines/manuals for district planning. The working group further indicated that the district is seen as a sub-system of multi-level planning. The totality of all planning activities at the level of this sub-system would vest with a single district planning body which would determine the priorities and allocate funds accordingly among various development sectors¹³.

The Seventh plan reaffirmed its faith in the process of decentralization and resolved to follow the process on the lines suggested by the Rao Committee. The planning commission proposed to play a promotional and guiding role in order to impart momentum to the district planning process.¹⁴ The Seventh Plan is based on the premise that key to effective implementation of development programmes is local involvement. Hence it proposes to secure this by taking effective steps for decentralization of planning and for involving local and voluntary agencies in plan implementation.

Eighth Five Year Plan emphasizes on people’s initiative and participation in the process of development. Over years of government’s participation in developmental work, people have largely become passive observers of such activities. Also an attitude has developed that every target must be related to and made proportional to the financial outlays that the plan promises to put into it. In fact, even the effectiveness of the outlays in achieving results has been declining over the years, and the cost of development at the margin has been increasing in real forms. This must change. A lot in the area of education, literacy, health, family planning, land and afforestation and employment generation can be achieved by creating a people’s movement for these activities with much less financial outlays.

To improve agricultural productivity in the dryland belt, watershed is taken as the unit of planning and greater stress is given on soil conservation programme. Sectors, sub-sectors and area which have relatively high employment potential would require faster growth. A geographically and crop wise diversified agriculture, wasteland

development for crop cultivation and forestry, rural non-farm Sector, small scale manufacturing urban informal sector, rural infrastructure, housing and services, have been identified as sectors and areas as constituting the basic elements of an employment oriented growth strategy.

The post experience of Panchayati Raj Institutions had been a state of neglect and impoverishment. Even after its existence for about four decades it could not acquire the status and dignity of viable unit of self-government and a responsive people's body. Several factors are responsible to impede the growth of Panchayats, such as absence of regular and periodic election within a stipulated period, prolong supersessions, variation in structure, powers and functions from state to state, insufficient representation of weaker sections like SCs/STs and women, inadequate devolution of powers lack of financial resources and above all, lack of political will.

Keeping in view the past experiences it became imperative to provide constitutional status to local self-government to impart certainty, continuity and strength. The 73rd Amendment of constitution of India essentially lays down certain grounds rules with basic structural framework so that it can sustain against external interference and could establish themselves as effective and strong people's institution.

Section- B : Changing Role of Collector / District Officer

When we consider the economic and social administration in the district, however, we mark the opposite feature, where change predominates rather than continuity. The changes in objective and goals, and in the methods of administration are in many ways new. The concept and introduction of Panchayati Raj, covering the whole ground from the village with its gaon sabha, nyaya panchayats and other bodies, through the Panchayat Samiti at the block level, and finally zilla parishad. Where jurisdiction covers the whole district in a new experiment in comprehensive local government concerned with the economic and social welfare and development of the district and its people. The old apparatus of district administration is related to this new structure in rather novel ways, which hold great promise. These changes involve new relationships in the whole of the administrative apparatus in the districts, new modes of communication and lines of controlling, guiding and influencing decision, and also somewhat new concept and methods of accountability.

Under the British Colonial rule, the Deputy Commissioner discharged three primary functions of government. As “district magistrate” he was responsible for maintaining law and order, as “Collector” he headed revenue administration of the district and collected revenue and other dues and as “deputy commissioner” he was the executive head of the district administration and coordinating authority for all departments of the government. After independence too he retained all the three functions but their character underwent great change in the successive Five Year Plans. As collector he has, of course, to collect government revenue and dues but his involvement in the implementation of land reform legislation, he has also become an agent of socio-economic change. As deputy commissioner his role has become overwhelmingly development. He is responsible for increasing food production and implementing five year plan programmes and developmental schemes by himself, playing the role of a coordinator among different departments and agencies of the government. He has also become the friend and guide of rural local development through Panchayati Raj institution.

With independence and the consequent changes in the nature of the duties of a district officer relating to development, planning and nation-building activities, the system of administration at the district level faced greater challenges. Such challenges were reflected at last in two different directions. First, the large scale expansion in the

administrative activities at the district level resulted in the proliferation 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 the panchayati raj, other local government bodies, cooperatives and other 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 grassroot level. These changes have brought the system face to face with a large number of politicians and a variety of political forces, Challenging the traditional homogeneity of the district administrator and the authority of the district collector.

The impact of many development programmes has not been felt because, in their implementation, there is greater preoccupation with expenditure, in puts and outputs than with the realization of the goals which the programmes have to achieve. While techniques relevant to the new functions of planning and development have not been introduced, the routine functions are neglected. In recent years, there have been more frequent breakdowns in law and order. As a result, officers at the sub-division and district levels have less time for developmental work and have to spend their time on law and order problems. The sub-divisional officer play hardly only active role in the new programmes, on the alibi that they are busy with law and order and revenue collection. They forget that often there is a close connection between law and order and the quality of administration. If the development programmes are properly implemented and the normal administrative machinery works in an efficient manner, the problems of law and order would be less severe.

The planning commission's working group on District Planning had emphasized the need for bringing about effective horizontal coordination at the district level by taking action along four major directions. These include:(a) Strengthening of the position of the collector; (b) placing the departmental functionaries under the direct administrative control of the collector by deeming their services as an deputation from their departments; (c) making the district officials accountable to the District planning body; (d) Streamlining and simplifying procedures for administrative and technical sanctions. According to CAARD, the strengthening of the position of the collector, either by delegation of more powers to him or by posting of a senior person in the service will not make much of a difference, as long as he is loaded with all developmental functions along with his other duties of law and order and revenue.

Though most of the developmental activities at the district level are implemented by the various functional/line departments, the collector as the chief executive in the district has a central role as the coordinator of all programmes implemented in the district. CAARD feels that developmental functions at the district level should be separated and entrusted to an officer called the District Developmental Commissioner who should be much senior in rank to the present District collector. This will enable the officer to give undivided attention to development matters.

It is the view of CAARD that along with the establishment of the office of District Development Commissioner, a significant restructuring of planning and implementation machinery at the district level should also take place. The proliferation of developmental programmes with their own vertical structures and the excessive departmentalisation at the district level have been found to be counter productive to integrated and coordinated development. There should be a clear demarcation between the planning functions at the state level and the district level. The Planning Commission's Working Group had emphasized this aspect and has called it "functional decentralisation". The district plan should be the product of a well conceived and well debated exercise taking full note of the local aspirations and local needs of the district community.

On the basis of the above analysis on the changing role of District collector the following conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the institution of the District collector has a long and glorified history behind it. From time to time, there have been several changes, additions and subtractions in the role, duties and responsibilities of the District collector in accordance with the changes in the politico-administrative Scenario of the country. On the whole, there has been an increase in his responsibilities, if not his authority.¹⁵ Secondly, with the introduction of Panchayati Raj in a large number of states, several department functions have been entrusted to the local bodies and the collector's role is reduced to one of guidance and advice.¹⁶ Thirdly, in many states, he has been deprived of his crucial judicial functions. In some states several developmental functions were also removed from his purview and were entrusted to the Deputy Development Commissioner or District Development officer.¹⁷ Finally, it is the Prime duty of the collector to secure the most coordinated functioning of the vast array of departments involved in the execution of developmental programmes at the district level¹⁸. The role is a difficult and complicated one and rests on careful interpersonal relations. In brief the emerging role of the District Collector underlines once again the need for careful choice of individuals and strenuous training so that they can work with politicians with fact, maintain interpersonal rapport with other functionaries at the district and state levels and provide able leadership to deal with critical situations¹⁹.

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