

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION

The British Parliament was the first legislature with respect of India in modern times, they created enactments and gave substance to the district head of administration, known variously as the

Collector (in respect of revenue administration)

District Magistrate (in respect of administration of criminal justice)

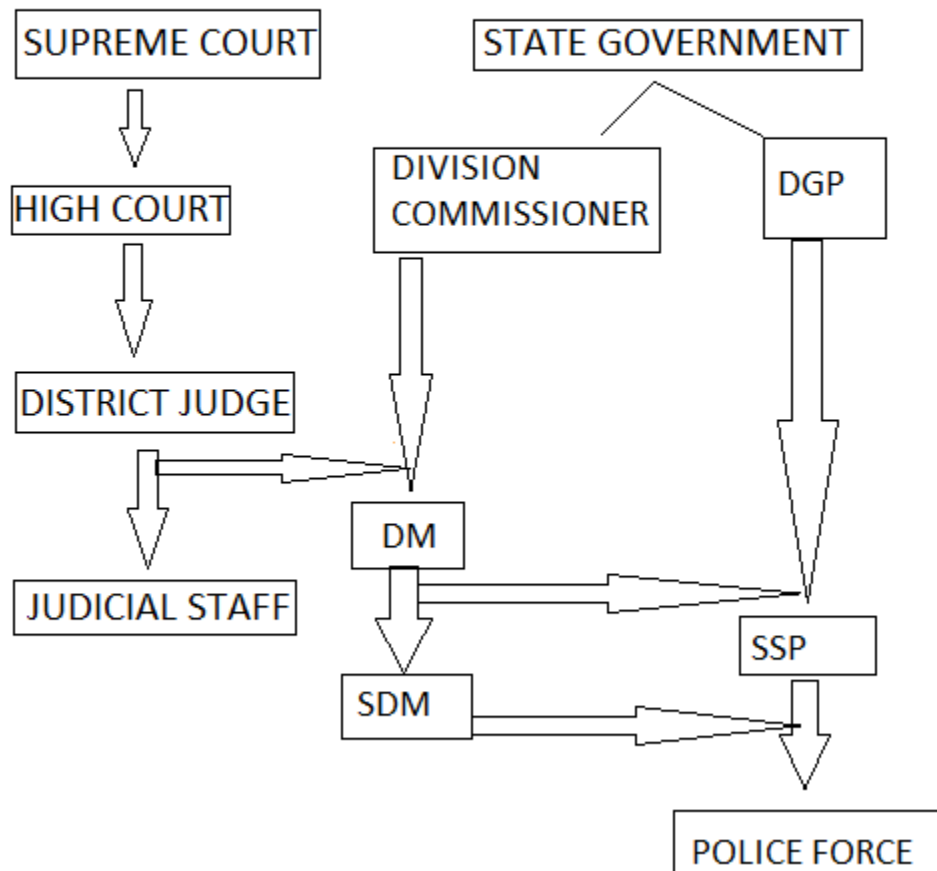
Deputy Commissioner (in respect of General administration and special functions; powers under local tenancy law)

PREVAILING ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE AND TASK OF DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION

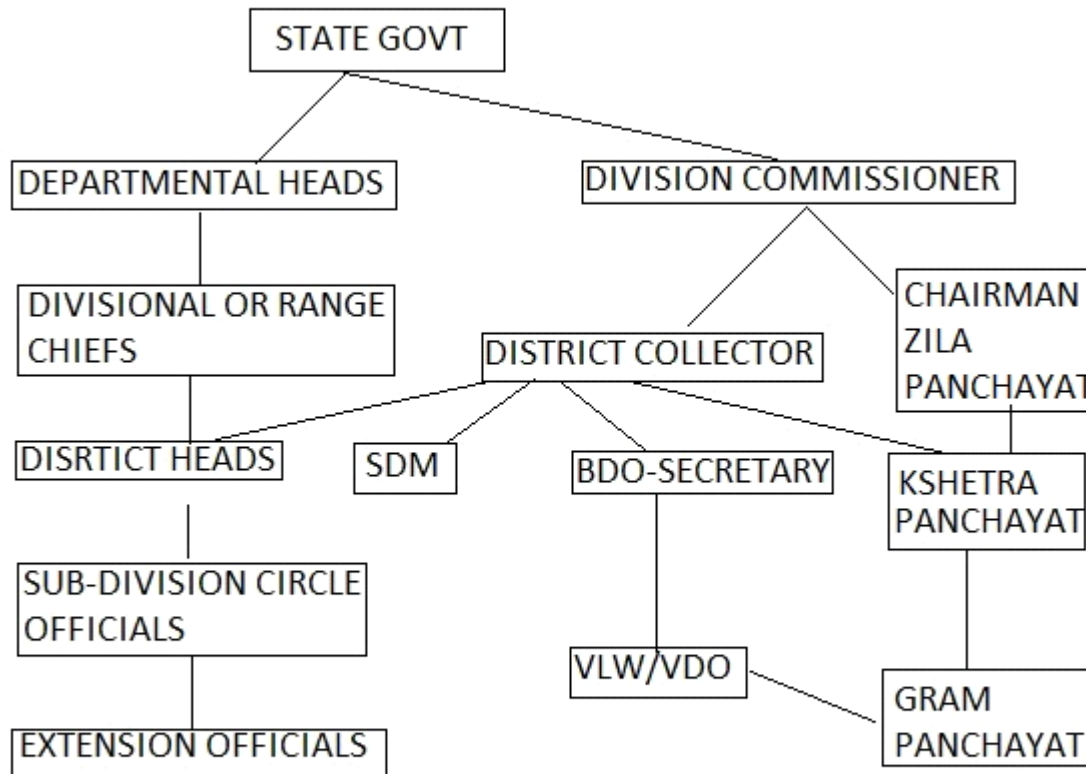
The overall administration structure presently prevailing at the district and sub- district levels in the country consists of the following components-

1. Administration of regulatory functions under the leadership of collector and DM, such as law and order maintenance, land revenue/reforms, excise, registration, treasury management, civil supplies and transport, social welfare.
2. District/ sub-district level offices of the line departments of the State Government and their agencies, such as PWD, irrigation, health, industries etc. i.e. coordination with various agencies/departments.
3. Local bodies (Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipal bodies) which after the 73rd and 74th CAA, have become the third tier of the government.
4. As a crisis manager, electoral officer and undefined functions in terms of residuary functions --> census, protocol.

MAINTENANCE OF LAW AND ORDER



GENERAL ADMINISTRATION AND DEVELOPMENTAL ACTIVITIES



NEED OF REFORMS IN DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION

As stated above , the widespread functions of the District Collector without well-defined roles result in lack of clarity and diffusion of the Collector's responsibilities. Also, after the establishment of PRIs/ULBs as the third tier of government, the (ARC) is of the view that there is need to redefine the role and responsibilities of the Collector in a clear manner because the office of collector and its widespread and vaguely defined

functions are affecting the following:

1. Union-State and Local relations
2. Imperatives of development management- used in the sense of achievement and objectives with optimum use of limited resources in manpower, finance, material time and also active contribution to the clarification and reformation of policies and objectives. Shift of focus from development administration -> development management
3. Law and order administration
4. District administration and democratic decentralisation
 - a. Bureaucratic resistance to delegation of power to PRIs
 - b. Vested interests of higher officials and middlemen take over in between
 - c. Elitist behaviour and biasness among the bureaucrats and government officials
 - d. No incentive to the DC in development activities
5. Modernizing the office of the District Collector
 - a. Grievance and public feedback cell
 - b. Management Information System/ IT tools /E Governance
 - c. Vigilance cell
 - d. Civil Society and Medical cell
6. Functional and structural reforms etc.

IMPORTANCE

It plays vital role between Union-State and local government and hence no removal of this post.

Improvement on the issues of personnel management, performance and outcome evaluation, effective citizen centric administration, use of ITs, process re-engineering etc.

CHANGING ROLE OF THE DISTRICT MAGISTRATE

During the 71 years of independence, many institutions of Indian administration have undergone changes- some minor and others quite radical. The institution of the District Officer- variously called as D.C., D.M. and Deputy Commissioner in different parts of India since the British days - has undergone quite a big change over the last five decades.

In the olden days, the D.C. was the imperial government to the people. Ramsay McDonald once described the D.M. as "the tortoise which supports the elephant upon which rests the Government of India". District administration headed by the D.M. was marked by - paternalistic approach and discretionary authority and what is, perhaps, most important- a direct bridge between town and country. The intrepid civilian used to tour throughout his area on foot, bicycle or horseback to have an intimate idea of the State of affairs in the district. The institution of collectorate did not confine the its role to only collection of land rents. But circumstances in the post - independence India did not encourage the D.M. to devote as much time and energy to scholarly work and establish a rapport with their charges. However, the D.M. continued to play an important role in the affairs of the States.

The System's skeleton survives but not its sustaining spirit . Of

late, the role of the D.M., in practice, is declining. The country too is succumbing to insistent demands of urban and democratic culture. Since the late 1960s, the power of money, the weight of political patronage and the pressure of influence have brought a significant change in the role of the D.M.

The complaint of interference in the work of the collector by the VIP's is not new. In the late 1870s, a civil servant in the district protested that these "distinguished visitors" from Britain were becoming a frightful nuisance; they thought that Collectors and Judges had nothing to do but to act as their guides, and that Indian officials had so little work and suffered so much from ennui that even ordinary thanks for hospitality were unnecessary; they took it all as their right.

Today's distinguished visitors are not less disturbing, demanding or burdensome because they appear to have a direct stake in the district. Meanwhile, authorities have multiplied, power structure overlap, crucial distinctions are blurred, the chain of command is confused and there is scope for endless controversy.

A frequent complaint is that D.M. are appointed too soon and do not remain long enough in their parishes. They mostly operate from their sanctum of offices, receiving petitions, granting audience, transacting business on the telephone, moving out only in honour of VIP's or for ceremonial occasions, and always keeping a close watch on the ladder of promotion. Their obsession with prestige and indifference to public welfare must be altered, if the IAS is to survive usefully in an age that attaches greater importance to scientists and technologists. The officer must win the confidence of villagers, knowledgeably discuss roads and fertilisers with panchayat leaders and work in harmony with

MPs and MLAs.

The experience of the last two decades or so has shown that both law and order and general district administration have steadily deteriorated. The high incidence of communal tensions, caste feuds, increasing poverty at the lower strata of society, lack of respect for law, ever-increasing terrorism and the rivalry between the magistracy and the police are manifestations of this deterioration. Lacking the moral strength and stature to resist political pressures, D.M. are manipulated to serve individual and sectarian interests, as opposed to the welfare of the majority of the people of the districts.

After independence, in the wake of acceptance of the ideology of the "welfare state" and the technique of planned development, the D.M. became the District Development Commissioner. He was saddled with multifarious responsibilities for implementation of variety of laws and programmes in land reforms, community development and social extension and cooperation, public distribution, poverty alleviation and removal of social disabilities.

Though the D.M.s responsibilities have increased, his authority has declined since independence. In the late 1960s, his relation with local politicians started radically shifting in favour of the latter. The local MLA started looking upon himself not only as a representative of the people but also as a super local administrator with authority to direct local officers, not excluding the D.M. The kind of political interference in administration increasingly became the order of the day making a mockery of the rule of law. A new phenomenon called 'criminalisation of politics' began vitiating district administration totally.

Every political party wants to derive maximum benefit from

administrative services which by 1970s largely lost their commitment to any value system. The real culprit is the acquisitive spirit dominating all strata in the present Indian society. The decline in the authority and prestige of the D.M. is not an isolated phenomenon but is part of an all-round decline of institutions and professions caused by the steady erosion of the value system.

In the 21st century, India also may think seriously if the system of district administration especially in the context of 73rd and 74th constitution amendments, needs substantial change and reorientation. But so long as the Rule of law as the basic principle of democratic governance cannot be ensured , the role and responsibilities of the D.M. must not be divided. Atleast the politico-administrative experience in Punjab, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, North East and elsewhere during the last two decades have amply shown that the district administration headed by the D.M. needs to be strengthened by re-defining the powers and responsibilities of the D.M. in his favour, otherwise political chaos and administrative mismanagement are sure to negate India's advance in other fields of nation-building.

REINVENT THE COLLECTOR: A DISTRICT CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER?

We are rightly puzzled by the question: what exactly the D.C. collects? As we enter the 21st century and the third millennium, this much-maligned and much-admired, and peculiarly Indian,

institution merits closer scrutiny.

But first, to address the above query, literally, land revenue is not of course, any longer a major source of state income.

Nevertheless, in these days of vast fiscal imbalances, revenue collection continues to be a major objective of the D.C. .The government expects him to exercise his vast authority and influence to ensure that all major revenue-collecting departments meet their targets. The collector also spearheads the small savings drive, an increasingly important resource for state governments.

The government reposes great confidence in the institution of the D.C. is apparent from the fact that all schemes and programmes to which government attaches importance ultimately become his responsibility at the cutting edge of administration. His performance is consequently assessed on a broad range of parameters, including inter alia, revenue collection, family welfare programmes, development schemes and law and order. Since the expectations of the people are also unrealistically high, the responsibility on his young shoulders is tremendous. His drive and initiative can make a material difference to the performance of the administration.

The powers of the collector, like his objectives, are largely undefined and nebulous, and based on convention and precedence, which extend far beyond the letter of the law. He has no formal administrative control over the innumerable offices that have proliferated in the district over the fast few decades. It is the halo and mystique surrounding the institution of the collector, sanctified by history and tradition, which gives him the de facto authority of distinct head of administration, and owes its origin to the 'steel-frame of the Raj'.

And for this reason the institution of D.C. has come under criticism as 'a colonial vestige', with no role in a development oriented democratic society, where power rests, or ought to rest, with the people and their representatives.

There is something to be said for the criticism that the institution of D.C. is increasingly becoming adrift.

- The ICS had some brilliant and outstanding officers, as indeed the IAS has today, but the former never sought to undermine system by their brilliance- rather they built upon existing institutions contributed immensely to set up systems which have survived long after they have gone.
- In sharp contrast, every other collector today tries to introduce something distinctive, which would bear the indelible stamp of his brilliance, outside the existing administrative framework. Such innovations, no matter how good intrinsically, cannot become institutionalised, as average tenures are short and in any case the likelihood is that another newcomer would overturn the innovations with his own. Meanwhile, the old system languishes on account of too little attention being bestowed on it.

The Collector's role as the leader of a team needs to be testified.

When even heads of States and Chief Ministers are reinventing themselves as CEOs, there is something to be said for having in place a district CEO, with clear measurable objectives.

One of the chief weaknesses of the current process of economic liberalisation and structural adjustment is that it has still to penetrate the rural hinterland. The collector could become the

nodal point to manage the process at the cutting edge.

Since fiscal concerns are at the centre of structural adjustment; revenue collection would, of course, be a major criterion but so would his ability to unlock the value of the vast sovereign assets in the district.

Elected local bodies are exceedingly loath to levy and collect taxes and the institution of the collector could provide an invaluable correction.

Expenditure management should be another major area, especially since there is so much infructuous expenditure at the cutting edge, which is incurred simply because it is budgeted.

He must also effectively address bottlenecks coming in the way of translating major investment approvals into projects on ground, such as handing over land, speedy provision of power connection, infrastructure development, regulatory clearances including associated law and order (power-theft) and environmental problems.

And finally, as government withdraws from direct eco. activities and concentrates on its core sovereign functions, the delivery system of welfare schemes, social safety nets, primary education, disaster management and medicare, should be a major foci of the CEO.

How the District CEO is to be positioned with respect to emerging local self government institution, however, needs to be carefully considered.

The idea is not to thrust new responsibilities on an already over-worked D.C.. All the objectives outlined above are eminently

achievable by a DC today, provided he is suitable focussed.

In any case, the formal authority of the collector is limited and he would largely be using his informal authority and leadership qualities to attain these objectives.

The re-invention would involve an entirely different perspective and measurement of success, in place of the existing bundle of targets that do not achieve very much when seen in totality.