

Concept Note
on
Project: Documenting District Governance in India
(Institutions, Structures & System)

IIPA & Regional Branches



Indian Institute of Public Administration
New Delhi

Concept Note

Project: Documenting District Governance in India (Institutions, Structures & System)

1. Background:

The issue of good governance has in the recent times emerged at the forefront of the development debate. To promote good governance India has recognized the urgent need for administrative reforms to enhance the capacity and capability of the administrative systems in carrying out goals for economic and social development. It has been realized that the deficiencies in the administrative machinery constitute a major obstacle to the effective implementation of development plans and priorities. The growing complexity of modern life in an age of rapid technological, social and economic changes has increased the role of the government, particularly in the provision of service delivery. In spite of liberalization and privatization the government still continues to be the largest service provider with the largest resource base and catering to the largest section of the population.

Experience has shown that the main purpose or objective in administrative reforms is to institute changes in the structures, policies and functions of the systems of delivery and in the behaviour and attitude of the personnel. This is intended to achieve maximum efficiency, organizational effectiveness and responsiveness in the delivery of services to the people. The citizen's perception of the state and its functioning is primarily based on its role as a service provider, law enforcer and regulator. Improving the quality of administration and providing a responsive interface between the citizens and the public services requires a number of new initiatives.

The district in India is in many ways the most important unit of field administration. It remains the basic territorial unit of administration in the states and continues to be the face of governance. It is a convenient geographical unit where the apparatus of public administration are concentrated. During 1991 census India had 466 districts and at present the number has increased to nearly 600. Within the districts are units called tehsils or talukas for departments such as revenue, education, health, etc and Blocks which are basic units for agrarian development. Local self-governments include panchayats and municipal councils. With the passage of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendment Acts the local governments have been saddled with major responsibilities, resources and political power within the district. The district administration includes all agencies of government and comprehends all institutions for the management of public affairs. As a unit of the administrative system it has been a pivotal point of contact between the citizen and the administration. It is truly the cutting edge of the administration or government and this is what constitutes its vital significance. Delivering high service quality is one of the best ways the district administration can respond to the demands of the citizens and also respond to competition.

2. Genesis of District administration:

District administration has been one of the important institutional legacies passed on by the British. The genesis of district administration dates back to the East India Company and the principle representative in the district became the collector of land revenue. Trading was replaced by levy and collection of land revenue. As law and order had to be maintained and the army could not be present everywhere the collector of the district also became the official responsible for

maintaining law and order. Later on the district came under the full governance and administration of the imperial power. The collector levied and collected the land revenue and other taxes. As district magistrate he maintained law and order and in doing so administered a system of justice. Gradually with need the district administration grew into a complex apparatus with addition of a number of other staff to man various functions/ services at the district level, like the Superintendent of Police, the Civil Surgeon, the District Judge, Superintendent of Jails, Executive Engineer for Public Works, DIO, District Agriculture Officer, etc. As the functions and responsibilities of the district expanded the structure also grew with a large work force to man the various sub systems. Even though the local institutions particularly the District Boards were given charge of some areas of operation but by and large the local institutions of self government tended to form administrative isolation within the district administration as a whole.

With independence due to the growing emphasis on development planning and the implementation of welfare and development programmes through a process of democratic decentralisation the role and structure of the district administration changed. The district administration evolved from the basic purpose of maintenance of law and order, revenue administration to the implementation of developmental activities for the economic and social advancement of the people of the country. Today the district administration is burdened with multiple goals, objectives and functions ranging from maintenance of law and order to implementation of development and welfare schemes to delivering a range of services.

3. Changing Profile of District Administration:

The most visible and effective element of administration, extant in the country for the past 250 years in an unbroken line of historical evolution, is the institution of the District Collector (also known as the Deputy Commissioner in some states and, while encompassing the role of the District Magistrate, is ubiquitously translated as the District Officer). An office, invented in the days of the East India Company and strengthened when the British Parliament took over the reins of administration in 1858, has, over the years, grown into a crucial and indispensable element in the country's bureaucratic and administrative hierarchy. It is one on which the government, at the levels of both the state and the Centre, is heavily dependent. At present, there are 739 districts in the country (*Government of India Web Directory*, n.d.).¹ Each district is led by a District Officer. Unless the context demands otherwise, s/he shall be henceforth referred to as District Officer. He performs a multitude of functions and duties spanning all aspects of the district administration. He is not merely the representative of the state government. In many ways, he personifies the government itself. His many tasks include the maintenance of law and order (in which capacity he is referred to as the District Magistrate), the collection of land revenues (in the context of which he is addressed as the District Collector), the coordination between departments for development activities, the redressal of grievances of people and a host of other issues. Most importantly (though not over-emphasised), he plays the sensitive role of balancing conflicting political aspirations in the best interests of the district. He is also charged with the duties of implementing important schemes and programmes of the Union and state governments by providing leadership and guidance to the staff of the various administrative departments under him. As the eyes and ears of the government, it is also his job to ensure that critical information on all matters in his jurisdiction is promptly brought to the attention of the state government. In times of crisis,

such as management of a natural disaster or a civil disturbance, his authority is unquestioned and his control is vast.

4. Challenges due to rising Demand and expectations:

The district administration faces many difficulties and conflicting challenges due to increasing demand for various governmental services, diminishing resources and general public distrust to name a few. Moreover due to a variety of factors the traditional homogeneity of the district administrator and the authority of the district collector are being challenged. Therefore building the capacity of the district administration requires a new thrust. The primary objective should be to enhance the ability of the district officials especially those at the cutting edge to achieve greater efficiency and openness in key “public dealing departments” to effectively deliver services and also to implement local development programmes. It should also aim to make the district administration more accountable and responsive to citizen’s needs and concern, especially those from the weaker and marginalized sections of the society. In particular specific functions like police, revenue administration, public distribution system, social welfare schemes, primary education, elections, services being delivered by the municipal bodies and panchayats need to be targeted. The services that can be targeted are; vehicle registration, land registration, driving licence, arms licence, elections, grievance redressal, passport forms collection counters, municipal services and various services rendered by the panchayats within the district.

5. Project: Documenting District Governance in India:

This proposal outlines the project to document District Governance in India (Institutions, Structures and systems) at the district level. While some such efforts were made in the British gazetteers, we break away from the framework of our colonial masters and intend to go far beyond. We envisage a much more comprehensive, deeper and innovative design for this study of the contributions of the District governance).

6. Historical Background (The Gazetteers):

The British undertook the most notable effort to document India and the districts in particular. They created encyclopedic, geographic directories of India called the **Gazetteers**. Starting in early to mid-19th century, gazetteer-writing was crucial to colonial understanding of India and helped the British in ruling over the subcontinent. The gazetteers offered detailed, local knowledge about India, which they used to build political strategies, design institutions and build narratives on India. They wanted to document this knowledge to make it easy for new British officers as they joined the districts.. Indeed, the British officers were also joined by Christian missionaries in this process of documenting. The practice continued well into 20th century, with a view to give ‘*a new Collector a comprehensive, and, at the same time, a distinct idea of the district which he has been sent to administer.*’ Lord Curzon for instance, went on record to indicate how important the gazetteers were to the administrative, revenue and police officers posted in that district, and remarked how frequently they were referred to.

7. Post 1947 Developments:

Post 1947, the process of writing gazetteers has fallen into disrepair. States do have gazetteer department, but it has not been a priority for most of the time. This is a major oversight. A district gazetteer typically '*should describe all that is worth knowing about the district. It should be an authoritative reference book for the administrator, the public servant, the social worker, the scholar and also the man on the street.*' For such invaluable information devices, it is disappointing that an ordinary Indian has hardly heard of them. Gazetteer writing was not unique to British India, but in this subcontinent, they were most comprehensive. Celebrated librarian Douglas Mathews, who spent ten years in India studying gazetteers, remarks that these books '*give one of the most detailed and comprehensive accounts of any large country ever to appear, and as authoritative records of their period they are probably unrivalled anywhere.*' He divides writing of gazetteers in three phases: A. 1815-1881: The early official or quasi-official gazetteers were produced for small territories (e.g. Henry Morriss' *Godavery*, 1878), for states (e.g., Lewis Rice's *Mysore*, 3 volumes in 1877-78), for larger provinces (e.g., Atkinson's on Northwestern Provinces or Hunter's on Bengal) B. 1881-1903: W.W. Hunter began the process of systematically documenting gazetteers in the Imperial Series: the first 1869 proposal for Imperial Gazetteer of India published in 9 volumes in 1881, 14 volumes in 1885-87 and finally, 26 volumes in 1909. The 'Hunterian' system thus evolved became a standard in which gazetteers continued to be written afterwards. C. 1903-1914: Finally and perhaps most importantly, come the District Gazetteers published under the authority of provincial government. The general pattern was that each district gazetteer will have a basic 'Text' volume with details on the district's geographical, historical, ethnic, linguistic, economic and administrative nature and that it would be supplemented by a 'B' or Statistical volume which was to be updated over time. The statistical volumes were updated in the 1920s for most districts, and even in the 1930s for some. Perhaps, Arthur J. Dash's Darjeeling's Gazetteer 1947 is the last pre-independence B volume, an upgrade on its 1907's version.

After independence, there was some enthusiasm to continue the practice of writing gazetteers. New Princely states had joined which were to be documented, the existing accounts had to be cleaned up of colonial mindset and labels, and most importantly, their utility as administrators' handbooks had to be transformed to a new informational tool in the hands of the common man. The government even constituted an Expert Committee in 1955, to this effect. Despite the promise, the exercise fell into disrepair, with less than half of the sanctioned gazetteers printed by 1975. After some time the central government remained uninspired. In fact, there was some interest at state level (for instance, state of Bombay and Tamil Nadu had begun their work right after independence), but over time, even that waned.

In other words, there has never been any systematic effort to document local/district level details on its cultures and histories on one side, and development and governance indicators on the other. Most district gazetteers produced in independent India are crude copies of the British gazetteers, following their framework, format and even content. They remain un-updated, archaically constructed and non-interactive.

8. The Need for New Imagination

The world has moved fast ahead, and there is a need to go beyond traditional ways of knowledge production and consumption. While gazetteers do carry some value, and while we do draw some inspiration from them, there are deeper reasons to go beyond them. Gazetteers carry British legacy, a historic outlook and a colonial lens to view India. We need to dissolve such frames to evolve new ones that truly reflect a self-discovery. This can be done through creating new imagination of documenting ourselves. We want to collect and synthesize knowledge about ourselves in our own way, the way we experience ourselves.

Most of all, we need to do it locally. It's unfortunate that even though we have fairly comprehensive knowledge and large-scale insights about India, sometimes even its states, the details of district or a taluka however, are entirely absent. Each district administration maintains their own websites, but most of these websites are static, and thinly populated with content. Information remains very scattered, lackadaisically developed and uninterestingly articulated. In fact, travel websites and books are more detailed, but they focus only on tourist cities. Such absence of district-level information of independent India stands in stark contrast to the painfully detailed documentation of British India.

9. Project Components:

The existing information at local levels remains in a scattered, disaggregated form. There is need to integrate it all. The Project will have three parts.

Part 1: This Part will cover the following

- a. History,
- b. Society,
- c. Geography,
- d. Geology;
- e. Folklores and culture of the district.

Note that for part 1, the Project does not embark on re-writing history of India, but merely bringing out the little-known stories from historical records and archives. The idea is to simply express what exists, or has existed in archives, historical and oral accounts.

Part 2: This part will essentially illustrate the governance and development indicators revealed under the following parameters. It will focus on ***Institutions, structures, systems and agencies*** that existed prior to 1947 and have undergone a change during the last 75 years in dealing with these.

- a. Agriculture and water resources
- b. Health and Nutrition

- c. Education,
- d. Industry,
- e. Occupation, labour,
- f. Social welfare
- g. Financial inclusion and skill development
- h. Law and order,
- i. Disaster management
- j. Basic Infrastructure including access to roads, portable water, Rural electrification and individual household toilets
- k. Revenue and the like.

Some more important parameters that need to be covered are:

1. Data-driven decision making
2. Digital infrastructure
3. Capacity Building Framework
4. Institutional mechanism to implement flagship programmes of Center, State and District level Governance
5. Credit and Skill development infrastructure to promote entrepreneurial culture
6. Humanising Development of the District (*Inclusive development*)

(Note: The parameters are only illustrative and branches can choose many more but those indicated may be covered)

The study will trace the historical evolution and also the transformation from the District Officer being an agent of the British East India Company to occupying the position of the primary field officer at the district level duly empowered by the Raj and, now, to an all-purpose administrator in present-day India, functioning as the face of the government. Even after seven decades of Independence, the District Officer remains a crucial and significant instrument of the government, offering the promise of impartial administration, fearless preservation of law and order, and being the patient and compassionate friend of the voiceless and impoverished. It will also focus on various Administrative institutions, structures, systems and agencies as well as the changing profile of service delivery mechanism over a period of time.

Part 3: This Part will propose a roadmap for the future.

10. What will not be there?

Tables, Maps and Graphs

The study will only be a narration of the developments and changes that the district has witnessed. Pl do not cut and paste from the district gazetteer. Proper references and sources may be given from wherever the material has been used.

11. IIPA and Branches:

The project will be executed by the IIPA and its Regional Branches and cover one district of the state which was in existence prior to 1947 and continues to be there even today. Faculty associated with the Branches will be the facilitator and help in completion of the study. However the entire responsibility of completing the project rests on the concerned Regional Branch.

12. Selection of the District:

Each Regional Branch will select one District for the study that existed before 1947 and continues to be there.

13. Financial Assistance:

IIPA will give a financial grant of Rs.25000 (Rupees twenty five thousands only) to complete the study.

14. Time line:

The study will commence on November 1, 2022, and date of completion is 31st March 2023.

- Selection of the District, appointment of any staff if need be etc may be completed by November 15, 2022
- Progress report may be submitted on 1st of every month to the Faculty associated with the Branch, which will be compiled and put up to the DG for information and necessary action.
- Care may be taken that the first draft is ready latest by February 2023.

15. Report

The study will be in a book form with not more than 250 pages.
