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DISTRICT MAGISTRATE

A district magistrate, often abbreviated to DM, is an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer who is the senior most executive magistrate and chief in charge of general administration of a district in India. Since district magistrates are responsible for collection of land revenue in the district, the post is also referred to as the district collector, and as the office-bearer works under the supervision of a divisional commissioner, the post is also known as deputy commissioner.

HISTORICAL ASPECT

District administration in India is a legacy of the British Raj. District collectors were members of the Indian Civil Service and were charged with supervising general administration in the district.

Warren Hastings introduced the office of the district collector in 1772. Sir George Campbell, lieutenant-governor of Bengal from 1871-1874, intended "to render the heads of districts no longer the drudges of many departments and masters of none, but in fact the general controlling authority over all departments in each district."

The office of a collector during the British Raj held multiple responsibilities – as collector, he was the head of the revenue organization, charged with registration, alteration, and partition of holdings; the settlement of disputes; the management of indebted estates; loans to agriculturists, and famine relief. As district magistrate, he exercised general supervision over the inferior courts and in particular, directed the police work. The office was meant to achieve the "peculiar purpose" of collecting revenue and of keeping the peace. The superintendent of police (SP), inspector general of jails, the surgeon general, the divisional forest officer (DFO) and the chief engineer (CE) had to inform the collector of every activity in their departments.

Until the later part of the nineteenth century, no native was eligible to become a district collector. But with the introduction of open competitive examinations for the Indian Civil Service, the office was opened to natives. Anandaram Baruah, an eminent scholar of Sanskrit and the sixth Indian and the first Assamese ICS officer, became the third Indian to be appointed a district magistrate, the first two being Romesh Chandra Dutt and Sripad Babaji Thakur respectively.

The district continued to be the unit of administration after India gained independence in 1947. The role of the district collector remained largely unchanged, except for the separation of most judicial powers to judicial officers of the district. Later, with the promulgation of the National Extension Services and Community Development Programme by the Nehru government in 1952, the district collector was entrusted with the additional responsibility of implementing the Government of India's development programs in the district.

FUNCTIONS AND ROLE OF DISTRICT MAGISTRATE:

The Functions and Role of the District Magistrate in India are discussed below:

As collector:

This is the traditional function of the district magistrate. As the head revenue officer his foremost task is the assessment and collection of land revenue. In addition to these taxes of different types, such as irrigation dues, income tax dues, agricultural dues, canal dues, sales tax, arrears, court fees, excise duties on various commodities, stamp duties, etc. are collected by his office. The collector assesses the amount of relief required in case of calamities. He also takes the relief work. Land may be acquired for housing schemes, development projects, etc. Land acquisition is another function of the collector. Preparation and maintenance of land records is an important function of the collector. The district treasury comes under his control and officers attached to district treasury functions under his supervision.

As District Magistrate:

Maintenance of law and order and safety in the district is the primary function of the district magistrate. He pays continuous attention to the problems arising out of social and political tensions, communal disharmony, caste problem, terrorism, smuggling and economic offences which may threaten peace and order in the district and safety of its people. The function and role of a District Magistrate can be discussed in the following three areas

Although the actual administration of the police is discharged by the district superintendent of police under the responsibility of D.G. of police, yet the police force, in general, work under the order and supervision of the district magistrate.

There has been erosion in the authority of the district magistrate as judicial magistrate. Due to the separation of judiciary from the executive the civil and criminal powers are now the responsibility of the judiciary under the control of the High Courts.

The district jails are under the general control of the district magistrate.

As coordinator:

The District Magistrate is the overall in charge of every important official activity in the district. He coordinates the activities of all the government departments which function in the district. The names of few such departments are public health, agriculture, public works, irrigation, education and cooperation. The district magistrate is regarded as a commander who is to co-ordinate their activities. He holds meeting of the officers posted as the head of the various departments at the district level at periodic intervals to take the stock of the work done. The district magistrate gives them suggestions, removes bottlenecks, and raises confidence. He guides the district functionaries.

As Development officer:

The role of the district magistrate in the development has assumed greatest importance after the initiation of the development planning and the Panchayat Raj system.

Several projects and programs of the rural development have been undertaken for the benefit of the cross section of the people and especially for the under privileged and downtrodden people. Several schemes of development related to health, education, employment, housing, agriculture, marketing of agricultural products etc and some special programs for rural women, children and the youth are in full operation

under the supervision of the District Magistrate. These programs aim at eradicating poverty and improving the living standards of the poor and helpless people. Besides, a number of projects, like DDP, DPAP, TDP, CAD, IRDP and many other important projects are undertaken. The district magistrate is responsible for the implementation of all these schemes. In fact, he is the captain, commander and leader of the developmental work of the entire district.

Role in Panchayat Raj:

With the advent of Panchayat Raj the role of the district magistrate is to be viewed in terms of his position and relationship with the Panchayat system. He is not only the Chief Executive Officer of the Zilla Parishad. He also looks after the functioning of the other two-tiers of the Panchayat body by providing necessary assistance and technical help and supervises to ensure that the priorities fixed in the plans are being adhered to. He also ensures that no conflict develops between the district administrative staff and the elected representatives of the Panchayats bodies and between themselves.

As Crisis Manager:

The effectiveness of the office of the District Magistrates is put to test during crisis. Here he is to act as crisis manager and savior. During emergencies caused by natural calamities in the nature of flood, famines, droughts, cyclones etc or man-made crisis, such as riots, fires, loot, murder etc. he has to arrange relief measures, organize rescue operations, check epidemics, ensure medical treatment, prevent panic and perform a host of other crucial functions. At the time of such crisis the DM and his staff appear to be the savior to the down trodden people.

Miscellaneous Functions:

The activities of the District Magistrate cannot remain confined within the written boundaries of his functions. As District Magistrate he is to act in various roles and perform various miscellaneous functions. A few important functions of such nature are mentioned below.

1. He plays the role of Chief Returning officer and coordinates the entire election proceedings at the district level.
2. He functions as the District Census officer.
3. He works as the official government representative in the ceremonial functions in the district.
4. He handles the protocol work in the district.
5. He looks after the working of the municipal bodies in the district.
6. He ensures the regular supply of essential commodities at reasonable prices.
7. He arranges training for government servants.
8. He deals with the personnel matters of the huge number of staff posted in the district.
9. He undertakes regular tours and in the district to know about the performance of the government work and also to listen to the grievances of the people about the government.
10. He complies and submits various reports related to the district to the appropriate authorities.

The existence of plurality of departments at the district level, and the multidimensional functions of various natures assigned to them, make the District Magistrate almost indispensable but overburdened. There is unparalleled uniqueness about the office of the district magistrate. He acts as a leader, motivator,

developer, doer, and saviour and, above everything, a top administrator. This makes his role overloaded, overburdened and overstrained. In fact, he is the chief actor in the district administration.

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