

# Book Review : Critical Perspectives on Public Systems Management in India - Through the Lens of District Administration

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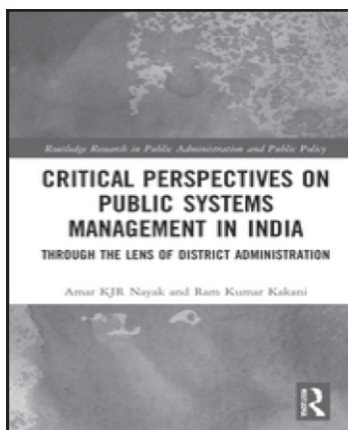
## Abstract

The book - *Critical Perspectives on Public Systems Management in India - Through the Lens of District Administration* provides an overview of India's public administration system by studying the district administration. Using a two-year project that involved conferences, interviews, and shadowing district collectors, the authors described the obstacles that a district collector faces in his/her day-to-day operations. The book is a must-read for any candidate aspiring to be a public service officer.

**Keywords :** public service, district administration, district collector

**JEL Classification :** H11, H83, Y3

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**Book :** *Critical Perspectives on Public Systems Management in India - Through the Lens of District Administration*

**Authors :** Amar KJR Nayak & Ram Kumar Kakani

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**Binding :** Hardcover

Ramsay Macdonald had once said, “District Collector is a tortoise on whose back stood the elephant of Indian administration.” Ramsay Macdonald's comment made years ago is more relevant today than ever before. Over the years, the District Collector or District Magistrate's role has undergone monumental changes, with the individual burdened with ever-increasing demands from different quarters of administration. District administration is a microcosm of public administration. Thus, the district administration is a perfect lens to view public administration.

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The authors of the book follow a lucid narrative style to introduce the various concepts so that readers who are not familiar with public administration can also follow the discussion flow. The methodology employed for the study is quite rigorous. The two districts' choice for the study is based on feedback from experts in public administration and represents the rural and urban settings. During a two-year study cycle, the researchers visited the districts several times, shadowed the district collectors continuously over eight days, and communicated with the district collectors for several hours.

The authors start with straightforward three objectives for their discussion. First, the study aims to help recognize the problems of district administration and codify the procedures and processes used by certain dynamic district collectors who were influential. Second, comprehend the country's structural problems in public structure management. Third, suggest a theoretical structure for district administration that is consistent with the country's constitutional provisions.

The authors adhere to their defined goals, and these objectives are reflected as one reads through the chapters. For example, in the two case studies discussed in Chapter Three (Case study of an urban district, Bhopal) and Chapter Four (Case study of a rural district, Osmanabad), the authors start with the two districts' backgrounds ; the history, economy, and other demographical details. This helps the reader to visualize the context and begin anticipating the potential issues. The authors then introduce their protagonists along with their backgrounds. The numerous current programs currently in effect and the latest reforms initiated in response to the challenges faced are detailed. Each case is then analyzed using multiple theoretical frameworks like the POSDCORB framework (planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting, budgeting), Mitchell's stakeholder framework (Mitchell et al., 1997), and competency assessment framework. Over the years, scholars have applied organizational design studies meant for an industrial organization to public administration. The approach may not be correct, given the objectives of the profit-seeking organizations and public administration being different. Hence, following a comprehensive analysis of Indian districts, policy - making mechanisms, and a comprehensive comparative study of sample districts from 14 other countries, the authors provide a basic public administration framework.

The book details the motivations for individuals who take up public administration as their career choice. Many choose public service after rejecting more lucrative career options. The inherent obligation that public servants have to serve society is expressed in how they carry out their duties. The value system for the district collectors is aligned with the public service values. If they are misaligned, then the citizens suffer. Hence, the authors indicate that the district administration's overall functioning needs to be improved so that the outcomes are beneficial to all the stakeholders, that is, citizens, bureaucracy, and district collectors.

The authors have painstakingly compiled a history of the district collector's position as it has developed over the last 250 years. In the pre-independence period, the role was primarily restricted to revenue administration and magisterial functions. However, post-independence, the role morphed into more developmental work, focused on rural economy and removal of regional imbalances. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments in the Indian constitution led to a tectonic shift in the district collector's role.

The authors note that young officers take up their roles with enthusiasm to improve public service in their respective districts. Nevertheless, they end up operating in an ad hoc fashion rather than in a planned manner. Most of their energies are spent in fire-fighting mode, and the struggles continue throughout their tenure. Even the experts who were consulted agreed with the authors' views. According to the authors, district collectors face a great deal of political pressure and are more accountable to a higher authority than to the citizens they serve.

The district collector's role is a dynamic one, primarily covering developmental work, regulation, and culture. The cases on the Bhopal and Osmanabad districts covered in the book touch upon all three aspects. For example, for the Bhopal district, the authors cover four instances, that is, Kisan Andolan (regulatory - law and order), communal frenzy and riot control (regulatory and cultural), railway flyover (development), and Samarpan Project - treating early childhood development (development). These cases bring out both the collector's

managerial and leadership skills and the collector's versatility in wearing different hats. While dealing with politicians, they act as managers, focusing on plan execution and avoidance of conflict. Switching the context while dealing with subordinates on the same task, collectors empower people and use their influence to push people towards the common goal. However, the authors believe that the time has come for the collector's roles to shift from transactional to transformational. Transactional leaders focus on doing things the right way. On the other hand, transformational leaders inspire others, act as their role models, and create an inclusive vision. Such a change is the need of the hour since, as public administrators, collectors have to juggle between multiple stakeholders. The authors propose that transformational skills be evaluated and honed at every level, from induction to periodic review.

The authors also present a dilemma that public administration in India faces today. This dilemma relates to the evaluation of the public administration – should it be more efficient or effective? Given the Indian government's changing interests in public administration, public administration is currently torn between efficiency and effectiveness. The authors add that another important dimension that public administration should focus on is sustainability. One of their recommendations is to limit the administrative district's size to make the collector's job more manageable.

The book is intended for two sets of audiences. One group is policymakers who want to know what is wrong with public administration and how to fix it. The other group is potential applicants applying to enter the public service, who are given a front-row seat to the obstacles that await them.

## Author's Contribution

Dr. Avinash Ghalke has done the analysis of the book and wrote the book review.

## Conflict of Interest

The author certifies that he has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest, or non-financial interest in the subject matter, or materials discussed in this book review.

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