



Pride and foreign aid-India's refusal to take help in times of natural disasters is self-defeating and against the federal spirit

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Highlights

- The Central government's decision to decline offers of humanitarian aid from the United Arab Emirates and other concerned countries for Kerala, New Delhi's unwillingness to accept foreign aid reflects poor judgment, is bad optics, and goes against the spirit of cooperative federalism.
- Moreover, this decision, when read with the National Democratic Alliance government's adversarial attitude towards foreign-funded NGO activism in the country, suggests a sense of insecurity and paranoia that hardly befits a rising power.
- While the government itself has been very cryptic in its response to the recent foreign aid offers, those in support of the government's informal decision have essentially made five sets of arguments to justify the government's decision.
- Let's examine their merit.

1. Policy precedent

- The strongest argument by far for refusing foreign aid flows from past policy and practice.
- It is argued that there is a policy in place since 2004, enunciated by the then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, to not accept foreign aid in times of natural disasters.
- The practice has been to shun foreign aid during natural calamities because the government has been confident of "coping with the situation" using internal sources.
- However, it is important to note that the 2004 statement by Dr. Singh was a political articulation, not a legal directive or policy document.
- In any case, since 2004, various policy documents have explicitly and implicitly suggested that the government may accept foreign aid during emergencies.
- The 2016 National Disaster Management Plan states: "...if the national government of another country voluntarily offers assistance as a goodwill gesture in solidarity with the disaster victims, the Central Government may accept the offer."
- Similarly, the National Policy on Disaster Management of 2009 and the Disaster Management Act of 2005 are both positively inclined to coordinating with external agencies and institutions for disaster relief.

- The 2009 document even argues — thoughtfully so — that “disasters do not recognise geographical boundaries.”
- In short, while the 2004 policy says that foreign aid can be accepted if need be, the 2016 policy document states that the government “may” accept foreign aid.
- The question is whether the situation in Kerala can persuade the Centre to operationalise the word “may” in a generous manner.

2. National pride

- The second argument against accepting foreign aid seems to flow from a sense of national pride: that India is not a poor country any longer and hence it doesn’t need anyone’s charity.
- Despite its powerful emotional appeal, this argument is misplaced at several levels.
- For one, it is misleading to say that only poor states accept foreign aid in times of natural disasters.
- For instance, India’s offer of aid was accepted by the U.S. in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and by China after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake.
- The reality is that countries reeling under natural calamities routinely accept emergency aid from other countries irrespective of how rich or poor they are.

3. Self-sufficiency

- The third argument is that India is self-sufficient and hence does not need relief material to deal with natural disasters.
- Here, it is important to make a distinction between foreign aid during normal periods and emergency humanitarian and reconstruction assistance.
- Besides, in the case of Kerala, by providing only a fraction of the emergency and reconstruction assistance requested by the State government despite repeated appeals, the Central government seems to have implicitly indicated that there aren’t sufficient funds available.
- Although New Delhi has taken the line that “in line with the existing policy, the government is committed to meeting the requirements for relief and rehabilitation through domestic efforts,” its actions so far fly in the face of this tall claim.

4. Aid with strings

- Then there is the argument that foreign aid comes with strings attached.
- Aid and loans often come with demands of economic restructuring or resetting governance priorities, and an occasional sermon on human rights.
- But there is again a fundamental difference between such funding and humanitarian assistance.
- Abu Dhabi’s rationale for offering aid to Kerala is straightforward: the Malayali population in UAE has been crucial in its development, and the aid offer is a recognition of that bond.
- A related issue is the paranoia displayed by successive governments in New Delhi about the ‘foreign hand/s’ constantly trying to undermine the Indian state.
- This has increased over the years, particularly under the current regime: consider the manner in which it cancelled the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) licenses of thousands of NGOs, including Greenpeace and Amnesty, depriving them of foreign funding.

5. Money won’t bring relief

- The fifth argument is that airdropping monetary aid doesn't help in the absence of pre-existing administrative capacity for proper distribution, reconstruction and governance.
- In fact, some would argue that monetary aid without a focus on governance capacity building is useless or could even make the situation worse.
- While there is some merit in such an argument, this holds little relevance to the case of Kerala which happens to be one of India's best governed States.
- New Delhi's unilateral decision to not let humanitarian assistance reach a needy State also does not befit the federal character of the country as the spirit of federalism demands that such crucial decisions be taken after consultations with the stakeholders.
- Moreover, there is an urgent need to evolve sensible, practical and empathetic guidelines on receiving emergency aid for the federal units in times of dire need.

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