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# DYNAMICS OF INDIA'S DISASTER RESPONSE: REFLECTIONS FROM INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI 2004 IN INDONESIA AND SRI LANKA

## *Jeetendra Kumar

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Evening College, University of Delhi

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## ABSTRACT

Diverse contestations swirl around disaster responses ranging from humanitarian to strategic. India's disaster response remains largely reflection of these variables in the wake of the Indian Ocean Tsunami 2004 where it provided assistance to prominently to South Asian and South East Asian nations. In this context, the paper reflects on nature of India's international disaster response and then captures India's response to two most affected nations including Indonesia and Sri Lanka in the wake of tsunami 2004.

# INTRODUCTION

In the domain of the international relations, the international disaster response and assistance is contested among scholars. One set of scholars argue that responses are guided not just by the humanitarian concerns but strategic calculations. Thus, interest politics remain guiding principles. There had been multiple instances to substantiate such claims. To cite, in the aftermath of Lisbon earthquake (Portugal) 1755 had huge destruction, England came to rescue of Portugal. This assistance by England could not be analysed merely from humanitarian concern rather strategic calculations also portray a better analysis as Spain was a common threat to both England and Portugal that prompted English to reach out to Portugal's city of Lisbon (Hannigan 2012). In addition, within the American political science literature, there are plethora of research studies, most of which conclude that in the event of natural disasters, government does cost-benefit analysis to provide assistance and interest of the assisting country is utmost important than the interest of the affected country (Green 1977: 12). On the other side, other set of scholars interpret the disaster assistance as manifestations of larger endevaour of cooperation and establishment of peace.

*Nature of India's Natural Disaster Reponses:* Among contestations around the rationale of disaster assistance, Indian disaster assistance is largely seen as manifestation of an aspiration to assist countries in misery and develop cordial ties through such assistance.

The foundation of such ethos lies in religion that espouses solidarity with the suffering and providing assistance with no expectations for return (Meier and Murthy 2011: 7). From the perspective of decision makers such assistance is "to earn goodwill of foreign governments and local people affected by disasters by nurturing a positive image of India at global level" (MEA 2009). Therefore, disaster relief is also characterised as a "symbol of friendship" (MEA 2009).To cite, the Ministry of External Affairs in a statement said "creating a positive humanitarian image of Indian doctors" was one end of the medical missions in Afghanistan (MEA 2010). Besides, these rationale of the disaster assistance other rationale cannot be marginalised in the event of natural disasters. India's disaster response has been characterised by limited assistance in the Asian regions keeping a low profile instead of powerfulness. Indian assistances come chiefly in the form of funding to governments as well as multilateral organisations. Indian government also has preference for bilateral government to government aid and avoids any other mode of aid acceptance. At the same time, it refrains from funding any domestic or international NGOs for carrying out relief measures abroad. This aid assistance is complemented by the assistance by Indian army, civilian personnel like doctors (Meier and Murthy 2011:17). The data between 2000-2005 reveals that the main constituent of India's disaster assistance to the victim countries comprises of medical assistance, provision of shelter materials and food aid accounting for 43 percent of overall India's humanitarian assistance (Harmer and Cotterrell 2005: 23). India has comparative advantage as one of the largest producer of pharmaceuticals therefore medicines and drugs remain significant part

of Indian assistance. Simultaneously, it does also promote economic interest of India by promotion of its products abroad (Chaudhuri 2005). Geographical situation of India encircled by the Indian Ocean and its adjoining region that accounts for nearly 70% of the world's natural disasters keep disaster management as important part of India's policy decisions. Such situation puts India to readily deploy its navy for carrying out disaster assistance, evacuation as well as conducting search and rescue operations (Mishra 2020). Besides, humanitarian logic of assistance, India's disaster assistance is shaped by regional foreign policy dynamics. In terms of territorial coverage, substantial part of assistance is attributed to its extended neighbourhood in South Asia. The Central Asia, Africa and South America region remains low in terms of India's humanitarian assistance (Meier and Murthy 2011: 15).

The Indian Ocean tsunami 2004 transformed global discourses as well as institutionalisation of disaster management and India was no exception to it. The country's disaster response had been largely ad-hoc in nature. India's official Indian disaster relief activities remain short of explicit policy to guide the government's aid decisions further compounded by weak foreign policy planning (Bagchi 2009). The tsunami 2004 also led enactment of a distinct national law famously called as of Disaster Management Act 2005 in India. The act has come to establish National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) aimed to coordinate civilian as well as military agencies. The enactment of Disaster Management Act as well as establishment of NDMA has caused efficient planning for future disasters (Mishra 2020). Therefore, the defining character of India's disaster response strategy consistently aims to evolve an effective mechanism to respond to natural disasters.

***Indian Ocean Tsunami 2004 and Nature of India's Disaster Reponses:*** The tsunami of December 26, 2004 largely impacted the South and South East Asian region took toll of approximately 280,000 people. The economic destruction caused by the tsunami estimated at more than one billion US dollars. Estimations put displacement of approximately 647,556 persons that moved into emergency shelters (Human Rights Watch 2005). In Indonesia, Aceh, on Sumatra Island was the worst affected by tsunami caused by an earthquake of magnititude of 9.1–9.3 on Richter scale. In Indonesia tsunami killed 129,2711 people and 750,000 partially or totally lost their livelihoods. In Indonesia, of the total population of 216 million approximately 0.07 % of population reeled under the impact of the tsunami. Another affected country, Sri Lanka was the second most affected country having no experience of tsunami in its living memory. It affected northern, eastern, southern and south-western coastal areas, 14 of the 25 districts of Sri Lanka with nine districts were severely affected by the tsunami thus necessitated greater assistance to recover.

In the wake of the tsunami of 2004, India went beyond its traditional disaster relief policy. Traditionally, India has confined its assistance to regional spaces but in the wake of tsunami its assistance went at the wider global platform. India being one of the country affected by tsunami 2004 declined to accept international assistance in the early relief phase (Relief web: 2005). This was because of chaos and confusion of Gujarat earthquake (2001) (Upadhyay 2018: 316) and simultaneous, assessment by India that it had enough resources to deal with the tragedy. It was also felt that the other countries in the region needed assistance more than India. Apparently, such moves exhibit India's regional prowess and its potential to be a significant global actor. Though, India was not averse to the external assistance as it readily accepted assistance in the long-term reconstruction phase from the multilateral institutions. These include World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and UN Agencies as well as NGOs that were already working in the affected region. Besides, India also accepted bilateral assistance routed through the multilateral agencies (Reliefweb: 2005). India's response orchestrated its maturity in the domain of disaster response at the international level as well as exhibited India's commitment to assist the most affected and needy countries. Then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh said: "If and when we need their help (international aid), we will inform them.

Several countries have offered assistance to us. The President of the United States spoke to me; several other countries' statesmen have also spoken to me. I have told them that, as of now, we feel we have adequate resources to meet the challenge" (Banerjee 2008). Critics of such stance of India pertaining to assistance saw it as a "false or misplaced pride" (MEA 2005). Besides its domestic engagements, India came forward to assist its neighbouring as well as extended neighbours in the relief phase. Multiple operations were launched to help out affected nations in the process. These included "Operation Rainbow in Sri Lanka, Operation Casta in Maldives, and Operation Gambhir in Indonesia". Overall, quantitatively more than 20,000 troops, 40 ships and 32 aircrafts were deployed in the process. India was forerunner in relief assistance phase, relief material worth 500 tonnes was supplied by Indian Air force. Indian Navy complemented the relief efforts by delivery of 735 tonnes of relief material. India's medical relief assisted through the Indian Army 15,000 people.

Indonesia was the worst hit country; several Individual countries came to assist Indonesia. For instance, United States, Australia and Japan provided assistance comprised of the military contingents engaged in airlift, sea transport, amphibious landings, medical services, reconstruct roads and bridges. China assisted in relief funds, besides, goods and medical supplies, rescue operations and DNA identification teams. Unlike other countries, china did not send its People's Liberation Army (PLA) to the affected area (Kondo 2006: 45-50). As far as the Indian government was concerned, it responded to Indonesian government request for assistance. Indian military, especially the Indian Navy played a vital role in assistance process. It helped Indonesia by supply of relief materials worth 40 tonnes and medical stores (MEA 2005). The western coast Aceh, ravaged by conflict between Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) and Indonesian government for decades saw deployment off the west coast of Indonesia. Overall, in Indonesia, the emergency phase assistance in Indonesia comprised of rations, medicines, tents and field hospitals. These were deployed in the most devastated region of Aceh. In Medan, Indonesia the Indian Consulate assisted 5,000 of Persons of Indian Origin and 500 Non resident Indians (NRIs) (MEA 2005).

India did not engage beyond the early relief assistance in the politics of Aceh region, having decade old free Aceh Movement led by the GAM and conflict with Indonesian government (Chandran etal.2009: 72). In another case of Sri Lanka, it was severely impacted by Tsunami. India had both political as well as strategic interest in the country. The close proximity of the country was an added advantage. The bilateral relationship in the past was characterised with suspicion. Sri Lankan had been apprehensive of India being a hegemonic power on the other hand India complained of maltreatment of Tamilians in the state. The assistance to Sri Lanka came from countries like USA, India and others. Unlike, Indonesia, USA military stayed away from conflict ridden Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) region. The major form of assistance from USA came in the form of food, shelter, water and sanitation, health, livelihoods recovery, psychological and social support, protection and anti-trafficking, logistics and coordination, and cleanup and rehabilitation activities. USA also initiated a micro-finance programs accessible to 30,000 families involved in tourism, textile, fishing, and handicraft industries in tsunami affected areas (CRS 2005: 25-26).

On the advent of Tsunami, India was the first country to provide assistance within twelve hour in Sri Lanka. The Indian naval helicopter was deployed with immediate relief material. This was far ahead of superpower like USA marine deployment in the region. India operationalised "Operation Rainbow," the Indian military was the first among foreign rescue forces on the ground in Sri Lanka (DeVotta 2010:53). The relief assistance to Sri Lanka was delivered by INS Sutlej, relief package of Seven Indian Navy ships with integrated helicopters and medical teams. Additionally one specialist hospital ship and an Army field hospital were deployed in the process of relief assistance. India assisted in development of essential infrastructure, clearance and restoration of water supply sources and other clearing equipment for restoration of communication. Indian Navy cleared harbour in Galle, Trincomalee and Colombo (Sakhuja

2005). India also undertook its operations in LTTE conflict region by reinstatement of the normal maritime operation. Thus, in the affected regions of the country, Indian Air Force and naval helicopters role remained significant in transportation of food, medicines and drinking water. Compared to other countries in the region, India's assistance was dispatched much in advance before other help reached to the country (Panwar 2020). Besides, Indian private sectors for instance, Lankan IOC, Ceat-Kelani, Tata Motors, Ashok Leylands, Ambuja were important private sector that came to assist during the relief assistance. The great challenge in Sri Lanka that India faced that it could not pressurise Sri Lankan government to ensure effective implementation of Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (PTOMS), the mechanism created in Sri Lanka for aid distribution in the north eastern region largely inhabited by Tamilians. Such mechanism for aid distribution devised for the northeastern region was largely opposed by a section of Sri Lankan political parties (Chandran etal 2009:70). Further, this mechanism of aid distribution was put on hold by the Sri Lankan judiciary. A lot of politics in the country moved around aid, the Tamil Tigers complained that the area under their control has received almost no government aid and remained neglected when compared to the Sinhala-dominated south (Majumder 2005).

***Assessment of India's Tsunami Disaster Response:*** India's disaster assistance amidst tsunami 2004 was manifestation of a self-confident nation. It also showed India as not mere an aid recipient country but relief assistance provider. It also strengthened India's ties with tsunami affected countries and in particular generated goodwill in Sri Lanka with whom it had bitter experiences of India's peacekeeping force in 1987. The swiftness of India's response in the advent of tsunami 2004 led to USA invitation to India to join a formation 'Tsunami core group' that comprised countries like Japan and Australia. The rationale of such group was to evolve a coordination platform to deal with disaster. But inadvertly this was characterised by many as India's co-option into an "aid coalition" as well as an attempt to bypass the United Nations from the domain of disaster relief and giving way to USA. But, India maintained that it was UN not the "core group" that could complement India's Initiative and maintained the stance that all further natural disaster assistance should be channelised under the rubrics of the United Nations. Such stance was reinforced as India participated in Jakarta donors' meet on January 6, 2005 and the U.N. sponsored international donors' conference in Geneva on January 11, 2005 (Banerjee 2008).The USA and India also initiated the "Disaster Relief Initiative" to embed the culture of disaster preparedness and undertaken any sort of future relief operation in collaboration with UN agencies and other stakeholders (MEA 2005). Despite this great effort by the US, regional countries remain apprehensive about US presence on their soil. This left scope for countries like India.

Post tsunami 2004, several disaster initiatives were rolled out to move beyond the national territory. Under the rubrics of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an interim unit of the SAARC disaster management centre was established in Gujarat to supplement as well as improvise disaster management among the SAARC countries. In order to reinforce cooperation in the domain of disaster management, it acts as significant unit for disaster related policy decisions. This unit also provides technical support and acts as platform to share information (Upadhyay 2008:324). Similarly, in 2016, the government devised a guideline to coordinate disaster management in the Indian Ocean. Military exercises have also become important source to share information as well as experiences to tackle natural disaster. For instance, MILAN exercise is one such initiate, where participating countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, Maldives and other share knowledge to tackle natural disasters like cyclones, tsunami, earthquake. These also include speedy deployment of forces, co-ordination, and medical assistance in the advent of natural disasters (Upadhyay 2008: 324). Apart from this, the Quad has emerged as an important forum in the aftermath of 2004 tsunami. Australia, Japan, India and the USA that played vital role in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in tsunami conceptualised Quad. This puts forward the potential role for Quad in the domain of humanitarian assistance as well as disaster relief across the Indo-Pacific (Upadhyay 2008: 331). In recent years India's vision for the Indian Ocean is encapsulated by the concept of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR). Besides, deepening economic and security cooperation in the littorals, SAGAR sets to promote collective action to deal with non-traditional threats like natural disasters, piracy and terrorism (Mishra 2020).

# CONCLUSION

Thus, India's assistance in the wake of tsunami 2004 enhanced its image as a trust worthy partner and dispelled fears as regional hegemon. Use of the Indian military to assist in the process of early relief assistance reflected its hard power. Despite vital contribution, Indian assistance to affected nations in midst of tsunami remained modest given the scale of the relief. Therefore, India's disaster response remains a significant and potential arena for future collaborative efforts to enhance trust with other countries.

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