

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA AND ITS POLICY FOR HUMANITARIANISM:

A Journey from Aid Receiver to Aid Donor

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Abstract: The most commonly accepted definition of humanitarian action is ‘acts performed to save lives, alleviate suffering, and protect human dignity for people affected by crises, conflicts, or natural disasters.’ These acts are by definition undertaken with altruism and without seeking any selfish or personal gain. However, how a country responds to humanitarian aid and reacts to humanitarian conflict can be a major detriment of its political posture at the world stage. Assets and capital lent for humanitarian purposes can significantly influence bilateral, and at times multilateral, ties. It is also often debated whether a nation should assist in humanitarian missions or instead just work towards domestic development. This paper is an attempt to analyse how India has navigated humanitarianism and incorporated it into its foreign policies, along with its journey from being an aid receiver to aid donor.

Key Terms: Humanitarianism, Line of Credit, Capacity Building, Humanitarian Economics, Soft Power, Disaster Relief

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1. Introduction

The principles of humanitarianism have been in existence for a very long time and has developed certain core tenets, namely – independence, sovereignty (in case of international issues), impartiality, neutrality, and humanism. Humanitarianism is defined as ‘acts performed to save lives, alleviate suffering, and protect human dignity for people affected by crises, conflicts, or natural disasters.’ By extension, this has also come to include the rights of the displaced. UNGA Resolution of December 1991 is a landmark resolution that affirms this and

created the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (now reorganised as the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs aka OCHA) and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF).

While the academic discipline of humanitarianism may seem to have emerged in recent past, it is widely held that the field emerged in mid-nineteenth century with the establishment of International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863 by Henry Dunant¹, Swiss activist and humanitarian, along with Gustave Moynier, Guillaume-Henri Dufour, Louis Appia, and Theodore Maunir. Just a year later, on 22nd August 1864, the first Geneva Convention was signed which focused on the treatment of wounded soldiers. It was signed by 12 nations. It was revised in 1929 and then again in 1949 to make it more comprehensive and provide more protection to the prisoners of war and other soldiers. Due to its intensive nature, it soon became the handbook for governing international humanitarian law.

Humanitarianism gained more traction with the establishment of UN High Commissioner for Refugees in December 1950 which was founded to help the displaced European victims of the Second World War (1939-45). Though it was initially planned to serve for only three years, it became a permanent committee after realising how much internal and external displacement takes place due to civil wars, persecution, cross-border conflicts, and natural disasters.

Humanitarian action is often undertaken in response to a disaster (man-made or natural). How governments and institutions react to these are critical. When a conflict or natural disaster occurs, people suffer from numerous conditions such as migration, food shortages, destruction of livestock and infrastructure. These have profound economic consequences, and possibly economic causes. For instance, the East Pakistan crisis of 1971 started when it was hit by a cyclone in November 1970 and did not receive any support from its government in West Pakistan. This dissatisfaction among the citizenry of East Pakistan (who were already aggrieved by the oppressive administration of West Pakistan which suppressed the Bengali identity) over the inadequate response from its government ultimately led them to rebel against West Pakistan's military junta. Though the cyclone was not the major reason for the discontent of the people, it proved to be the final nail in the coffin that led to the split of Pakistan and formation of Bangladesh. This is an example that shows how a poor response to a natural disaster could lead to political ramifications that could culminate into a catastrophe.

2. Literature Review

The related field of humanitarian economics is an emerging field which saw major academic developments in the decade of 2010s. The foundation for the discipline was laid by Gilles Carbonnier in his groundbreaking 2015 book titled *'Humanitarian Economics: War, Disaster, and the Global Aid Market'* which analyses in depth the dynamics of humanitarian economics

¹ Post the Battle of Solferino on 24th June 1859, Henry Dunant witnessed first-hand how an entire town of Castiglione della Pieve (Umbria, central Italy) came together to provide shelter and tend to the injured soldiers. Dunant noticed how all the wounded were being treated and nourished without discrimination on the basis of their nationality. This helped him conceive the idea of universal fraternity which went on to culminate into the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) which aims to deliver aid and assistance to all those aggrieved.

and how humanitarian action during war, disaster, and crisis impacts the prosperity and stability of the state. Carbonnier classified humanitarian economics as a “field of study that deals with economic and political dimensions of humanitarian crises and responses.” (Carbonnier, 2015) He also incorporated the rational choice theory within the framework of humanitarian action to analyse if factors other than altruism affect the relief enterprise. It was this theorisation that helped him apprehend the kidnap-and-ransom activities which became painfully common for the on-ground humanitarian activists who were targeted by armed groups and utilised as “leverage”. This theory also provides basis for the assertion that humanitarian action can be used as an instrument to forge diplomatic relationships and assert influence, which shall be discussed in greater detail in section six of this paper. Carbonnier further explains war, terrorism, disaster, and survival economics, the theories of which are beyond the ambit of this paper.

A trend that has emerged in most papers pertaining to this field is that the concept of humanitarianism is liberally and casually assumed to have originated in the West. While discussing the origins of humanitarianism only Western events are taken into purview. The flow of events generally analysed is: rules of war in ancient Greece and Rome, Immanuel Kant’s call for ‘social cohesion’ post the Lisbon Earthquake in 1755, Florence Nightingale treating the wounded British soldiers during the Crimean War (1853-56), establishment of International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) by Henry Duvant in 1863, followed by the establishment of the United Nations. “Its [international humanitarian system] origins are in the Western and especially European experience of war and natural disaster, yet it is now active across the world in a range of operations.” (Davey, Borton, & Foley, 2013) Non-Western developments and responses have been largely neglected or are not studied with the same rigour as their western counterparts. For instance, the United Nations recognised terrorism as an agenda of international importance as late as 2006 when the UNGA adopted the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (Resolution 60/288). This was in response to the deplorable 9/11 attacks. It was also then that the international community became more sensitised; however, decades of odious cross-border activities in the East did not make it to the discussion table. This selective study of history has hurt our ability to study development of humanitarian consciousness. “The lack of historical, institutional and operational memory is a persistent problem.” (Davey, Borton, & Foley, 2013) A major focus has also remained on studying events post the end of the Cold War, mainly because the disintegration of the USSR and growing national awakening in Africa and Asia led to a wave of all types of conflicts and atrocities.

The following pages have been dedicated to analyse those events that shaped path for humanitarianism in India and how India monetised it.

3. India’s First Acts of Humanitarianism

Humanitarianism stems from the altruistic characteristic of human beings which is why it cannot be said to have a specific geographical origin. Humanitarian precepts existed as far back

as 3000 BCE. The Code of Hammurabi² tells us that Mesopotamians held the captors of prisoners of war accountable if the prisoner died due to abuse or neglect while in custody. (Reid, 2022) During the Battle of Kurukshetra in Mahabharat, there were strict regulations in place to ensure that the war be fought as per the standards of *dharmayudh* (righteous war). The ancient Indian war rules drew a clear line between civilians and belligerents, and attacking a retreating soldier too was an offense. (Enroute Indian History, 2023) Article 48 of the Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Convention is based on this concept. The Rig Veda also admonished acts of aggression displayed towards the weak, children, women, and elderly. The Mauryan Empire (321 – 185 BCE) also provides us with similar evidence. Kautilya wrote in detail about the King's duties towards his people in his book 'Arthashastra'. Charitable hospitals and dispensaries were established during the reign of Ashoka for all people and animals. (Gayen, 2024) The major rock edict 2 also informs us that right to health was granted to all the citizens of the empire. (Bhardwaj, 2024)

Even before gaining independence, India sent a medical relief team in 1938 with Dr. Dwarkanath Kotnis to China to help them in their war against imperial Japan. By 1949 India began to extend concessional loans to its immediate neighbours such as Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar for infrastructural and social development. India also donated \$10 Mn for the Colombo Plan for Cooperative Economic Development of South and Southeast Asia in 1950. (Nainar, 2024) Such contributions were regularly made by the Government of India to develop the neighbouring region. However, in 1959, India took a major step on the grounds of humanitarianism which would go on to obliterate its relationship with China – India granted political asylum to Dalai Lama XIV when tensions were rising in the Tibetan region. It undid all the progress that India and China had made. This is also a major milestone event because it cemented India's intentions of being a protector of peace and sovereignty vis-à-vis being a silent watcher.

India's involvement in the 1970-71 East Pakistan crisis can be classified as a humanitarian response too. After Operation Searchlight in March 1971, thousands of Bengalis crept into India to find a safe haven. As the situation deteriorated in East Pakistan, the refugee influx into India increased so much so that it put a massive strain on the Indian economy. Around 1 Crore refugees entered India during this time. On 28th March 1971, Archer Blood (American Consul General to East Pakistan) sent a telegram to Washington informing about the selective genocide that had unfolded on the streets of Dhaka post Op Searchlight. (Bakshi, 2020) This came to be known as the famous 'Blood Telegram'. It is indicative of the horrors that were unravelling in the country. This was the first time when India was directly involved in the liberation war of another nation. Though it cannot be characterised as 'altruism' because there were several factors that affected India directly, but it also cannot be ignored that for over 12 months India poured in tonnes of resources to rebuild the crippled country. After the November 1970 cyclone which left East Pakistan distraught, it was India and not West Pakistan that responded first. India historically even allowed Pakistan to fly over Indian airspace to transport relief supplies

² The Code of Hammurabi is a compilation of 282 laws written in Akkadian language using the cuneiform script. It was created by King Hammurabi of Babylon around 1750 BCE and was carved on a black stone pillar so that all people could see and follow the code. It is considered to be one of the most comprehensive ancient legal texts.

to East Pakistan. “155 packages, containing 2,265 kilogrammes of vaccines and sulpha-drugs were gifted by India.” (From the Archives (November 25, 1970): India’s Gesture to Pakistan, 2020)

4. India’s Transformation from Aid Receiver to Donor

India has been an aid receiver for much of its history after independence, trying to reconstruct its economy which was systematically dismantled during the colonial rule. India consumed billions in global aid to develop itself. A reflection of this can be seen in the graph below which shows the consumption (in Billions USD) from 1960 to 2023.

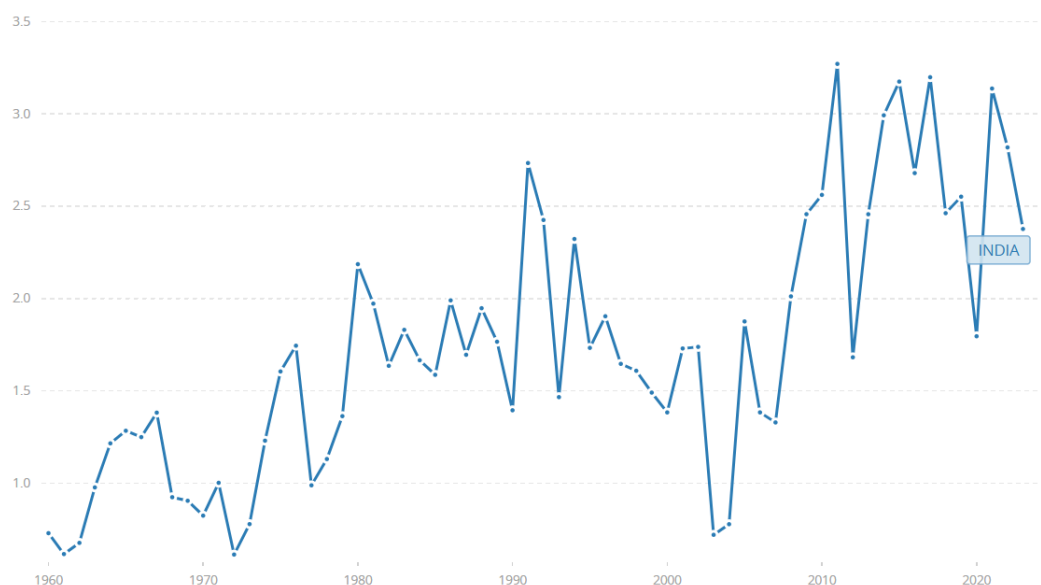


Fig 1: Global aid received by India (in Billions USD)

(Source: World Bank Data)

However, in the past two decades India has transformed itself into an aid donor. It gives out more – in the form of line of credits, capacity building measures, and grants – than it consumes. India extended line of credits worth approximately \$26.87 Bn and \$14.7 Bn in grants in the past two decades despite not being a member of the Organisation for Economic Development (OECD). To promote capacity building, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) was established in 1964 under the Ministry of External Affairs. It has facilitated technical skill development in more than 160 countries through more than 300 courses. An expenditure of \$656 Mn was incurred in between 2000 and 2022 at the ITEC. (Nainar, 2024)

The India Army also helped establish the Centre for United Nations Peace Keeping (CUNPK) in New Delhi in 2000 which helps train more than 12,000 troops annually and sends Mobile Training Teams to foreign countries to aid ‘capability’ building in UN Peacekeeping. India also significantly improved its presence in the UN Peacekeeping missions in the last two decades. From 1950s till now, India has sent 290,000 peace-workers to more than 50 missions

worldwide. At present, 5000 India troops are deployed to 9 out of 11 active UN Peacekeeping Missions.

Mission Name	Location	India's Contribution
UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF)	Golan Heights	Logistics Battalion with 188 personnel for logistics security
UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)	Lebanon	Infantry battalion group with 762 personnel and 18 staff officers
UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO)	Middle East	Military observers and support staff
UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP)	Cyprus	Deployment of officers as staff and military observers
UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Infantry battalions, medical units, and support staff
UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)	South Sudan	Infantry battalion, medical personnel, and engineering units
UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNIFSA)	Abyei	Military observers and staff officers
UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA)	Central African Republic	Formed Police Units (FPUs) and military observers
UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)	Western Sahara	Deployment of military observers

Table 1: Details of India's Contribution in 9 UN Peacekeeping Missions

Source: Press India Bureau (09 MAR 2025)

5. Handling the 2004 Tsunami: The Turning Point

The Indian Ocean tsunami of 26th December 2004 proved to be the turning point in India's journey as an aid receiver. It was for the first time when India refused to accept foreign humanitarian assistance. Countries such as Russia and Israel along with many international organisations had extended relief to India which India refused. This marked a major policy shift in India's disaster management posture. The then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made the following statement: "We feel that we can cope up with the situation on our own and we will

take their help if needed.” (The Economic Times, 2018) The spokesperson of Ministry of External Affairs Syed Akbaruddin had explicitly stated how India intended to make a transformation in the humanitarian relief sector. “As a general policy in case of rescue and relief operations, we have followed the practice that we have adequate ability to respond to emergency requirements,” stated he. (The Economic Times, 2018)

The aftermath of the tsunami saw what can be classified as one of the most systematic and coordinated relief operation in the history. India launched Operation Castor for Maldives, Operation Rainbow for Sri Lanka, Operation Gambhir for Indonesia, Operation Madad for Tamil Nadu and Andhra, and Operation Sea Waves for Andamans & Nicobar Islands. 14 vessels of the Indian Navy and Coast Guard were deployed with support materials to carry out search-and-rescue ops and rehabilitation. INS Mysore, INS Udaygiri, INS Aditya, and INS Samuna were deployed to Maldives with 15 medical teams, mobile field hospital stations of 140 personnel, and hospital beds. Under Operation Rainbow, INS Sharda and INS Sutlej were sent to Galle, and INS Sandhyak and INS Sukanya were deployed to Trincomalee carrying medical supplies and relief equipment. A 24x7 Control Room was established in the Indian High Commission at Colombo immediately after the tsunami struck on the 26th of December. India sent special relief teams to Galle, Trincomalee, Ampara, Tangalle, Hambantota, Batticaloa, and Minneriya, all of which were struck the hardest. (High Commission of India, Colombo, 2015)

Apart from this, India also focused on rebuilding of infrastructure in Sri Lanka. Specialised Disaster Relief Teams of the Indian Armed Forces inspected 17 railway bridges between Bentota and Matara and helped construct a 350-foot Bailey bridge at Arugam Bay to ensure smooth connectivity for transportation of relief supplies. Indian Navy also undertook massive intensive hydrographic surveys of Colombo, Trincomalee, Kankasanturai and Galle harbours. The Colombo-Matara rail link was rebuilt and given an upgrade by IRCON (Indian Railway Construction International Limited) and RITES provided essential hardware and coaches. A concessional Line of Credit worth \$167.4 Mn was extended by India. (High Commission of India, Colombo, 2015) Furthermore, ₹100 Crore was extended to Bangladesh in 2005 for tsunami victims. \$25 Mn was awarded to Sri Lanka, \$1 Mn to Indonesia, and \$500,000 to Thailand for rehabilitation.

Thus, India cemented itself as a self-sustained country which could handle its disasters and began its transition to an aid donor. Later in 2013 when Uttarakhand was hit by massive cloudbursts, India again refused to take assistance from USA and Japan, which offered \$200,000. This was in conformation of its unsaid rule to not accept foreign funds for disasters. The PM National Relief Funds and PM CARES (Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations) Funds were set up which are tasked with providing immediate assistance in case of a disaster.

6. Expansion of Soft Power using Humanitarianism

India with its extensive lines of credit and capacity building programmes led by ITEC has forged strong ties with many developing countries. Despite low connectivity and transportation issues, India engages in trade of amount \$2 Bn with the Central Asian region. It is important to note that India shifted its focus to Central Asia only in the past decade and a half and was beaten

to it by China which has already a major strategic hold over the region. China focuses on its C5+1 diplomatic model to counter the American version of it and assert its dominance in the regions to control its lucrative resources. India does not attempt to threaten the Chinese position here but rather present itself as a supplementary partner; this is mainly because China has a direct link with the region while India does not and has to depend on long, complex, and geopolitically volatile routes to reach to the Central Asian region. As compared to India's \$2 Bn trade, China engages in trade worth over \$106 Bn.

India has extended approximately \$26.87 Bn as Line of Credit to over 62 countries. If we compare the amount of trade conducted with these countries before and after, we observe that in almost all cases, the Indian exports have gone up. It is also noteworthy that this increase may have been caused by other factors such as tariffs or ease of doing business but the underlining principle remains the same, that India was able to establish a profitable trading partnership with a country owing to its diplomatic efforts in the humanitarian and other sectors.

				in USD Mn						
	Country	LoC	Year	X 2019	M 2019	X 2025	M 2025	Net 2025	% Incr in X	
CENTRAL ASIAN REGION	Kyrgyzstan	\$200 Mn	2021	29.11	2.04	49.82	22.1	27.72	71.14	
	Uzbekistan	\$488 Mn		193.45	92.34	644.76	208.69	436.07	233.30	
	Kazakhstan		2020	193.68	1597.36	197.15	739.63	-542.48	1.79	
	Turkmenistan	\$1 Bn	2020	37.3	3.69	88.31	462.85	-374.54	136.76	
	Tajikistan		2020	24.61	0.29	57.82	107.62	-49.8	134.95	
				X 2015	M 2015	X 2025	M 2025	Net 2025	% Incr in X	
SOUTH ASIAN REGION	Bangladesh	\$7.86 Bn	2010-17	8242.92	1213.79	11251.04	1733.51	9517.53	36.49	
	Maldives	\$1.43 Bn	2018	226.26	5.89	473.26	172.83	300.43	109.17	
	Mauritius	\$1 Bn	2016-26	779.47	26.68	465.45	47.04	418.41	-40.29	
	Myanmar	\$0.745 Bn	2012-26	956.9	506.73	739.31	1259.34	-520.03	-22.74	
	Nepal	\$0.75 Bn	2016	7108.86	649.43	7450.1	1987.4	5462.7	4.80	
	Sri Lanka	\$2 Bn	2022	4226.73	994.02	4882.84	1138.31	3744.53	15.52	
LATIN AMERICA	Chile	Expanded PTA	2016	665.24	2158.1	1212.15	3960.88	-2748.73	82.21	
	Cuba	\$120 Mn	2022	52.52	1.52	19.34	4.93	14.41	-63.18	
	Guyana	\$23.37 Mn	2024	24.8	16.54	117.77	8.73	109.04	374.88	
	Jamaica	\$15 Mn	2001-19	41.25	1.26	110.47	11.25	99.22	167.81	
	Suriname	\$124 Mn	2020	12.31	242.39	30.51	26.45	4.06	147.85	

Table 2: India's export and import data for 2015/2019 and 2025

Source: UN Comtrade Database

Key: X- Exports, M-Imports, %Incr- Percentage increase in exports

India extend an LoC worth \$35.80 Mn, in January 2020, to Suriname to finance its rural electrification project in 50 villages. Following this, India extended 9 LoCs to the Government of the Republic of Suriname, increasing the assistance amount to \$124.98 Mn. Projects such as rehabilitation, water and power supply, installation of milk processing plants, and purchase of helicopters were undertaken courtesy of this. (Exim Bank India) Similarly, India has extended LOCs worth over \$745 Mn to Myanmar, spanning over two decades, to build railways, irrigation projects, electric power transmission lines (assisted by Power Grid Corporation of India), and other infrastructure developmental projects. India even provided humanitarian assistance to nations such as Türkiye when it was struck by multiple earthquakes in quick succession in 2023 despite the fact that Türkiye is a close aid of Pakistan. The recent Makkah Pact reinforces that claim.

7. The Lost Opportunity Cost of Being an Aid Donor

It is not uncommon to come across questions like would providing massive loans and grants to other nations not make the growth slower at home? This is generally not true since most governments have a dedicated relief fund which is used to fund such projects and any expense that goes overboard, if it goes overboard which is rare, is generally balanced in long-term trade and diplomatic returns. For instance, India extended an LOC worth \$124.98 Mn to Suriname over the years, which resulted in amplification of trade between the two nations. It even allowed the two nations to jointly invest and cooperate in other sectors of trade. Assistance provided, in this respect, is proportioned with the foreign trade conducted with the country assisted, and many-a-times the donor country seeks diplomatic access more than profits.

However, there is another side to it. If we consider all humanitarian responses, including the armed responses by nations, then it may be asserted that humanitarian acts do have a huge economic cost. The USA's *war on terror* may be the most suitable illustration. The *war on terror* started as a 'humanitarian intervention' which resulted in a massive fiscal burden costing trillions of dollars due to the 'stabilisation campaigns' Iraq and Afghanistan. It had to siphon funds from other departments' budgets, severely impairing and hindering the domestic politics. (Carbonnier, 2015) Thus, providing humanitarian aid in itself does not necessarily hinder growth prospects at home for the donor country but rather it is dependent upon whether it is a fiscal transaction or a military operation. Maxim Chupilkin and Zsóka Kóczán eloquently explain the effects of war on territory of the home country vis-à-vis off-territory, essentially indicating a 7-percentage point drop in the GDP in case of on-territory. (Chupilkin & Kóczán, 2022) Therefore, humanitarian actions, such as the *war on terror* or the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 may result slower development but simple financial assistance may not.

8. Conclusion

Humanitarian actions are undertaken to alleviate suffering and protect the rights and dignity of those people who have been affected by the crises, conflicts, and disasters. India has had a long journey, transitioning from an aid receiver to aid donor with the 2004 tsunami playing a pivotal role. Humanitarianism, though performed altruistically, can also help forge diplomatic relations and is an influential instrument to expand the soft power of a country. It may be in the form of financial assistance, or a military operation, or sending an envoy. Providing assistance also does not lead to slower growth in the home country. India is a significant example for this. With the recent Nepal tragedy, India has once again shown its disaster relief capabilities, providing support materials, troops, and finances, and setting up a 24x7 control room to monitor the situation. Humanitarianism as a concept does not belong to any specific geographical location and its history can be traced back to almost all places on the face of the Earth. Altruism and warmongering are both innate qualities of human beings, analogous to ying and yang.

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