

## India through Western eyes: a different way of managing humanitarian aid?

*Julien Guillot, Justine Penan et Loé Grandclément* • Sciences Po Bordeaux (France)

---

**The rise of sovereignty does not spare humanitarian aid. A prime example of this trend, India rejects foreign interventionism on its territory while making humanitarian aid a component of its own sovereignty.**

---

For several decades now India has been keen to present itself as an exporter of aid – particularly at sub-regional level – while it continues to be seen as one of the main recipients of international humanitarian assistance. Could it be that behind this apparent paradox lies a distinct humanitarian response envisaged by the country? To what extent does this vision conflict with the Western way of thinking? Has Narendra Modi’s government reinforced the already predominant role of the State in this area? This article puts forward some tentative answers to these questions.

### **India’s humanitarian vision: a counter-model to the Western model?**

The Indian approach to humanitarian aid is undoubtedly different from that conveyed by the Western world, if only because of its past as a colonised nation and its firmly entrenched status as a beneficiary of international aid. The cultural differences are also obvious – the Christian religion on the one hand, Dharmic religions<sup>1</sup> on the other – even if some common values can be identified. These two major religious schools value or even consider essential helping others, compassion and charity in general. In their sacred texts, there are numerous examples of scriptures mentioning some form of charity.<sup>2</sup> For example, in the *Vedas*, *dāna* designates an act of hospitality towards the most needy. In the Buddhist religion, *Karunā*, a sort of complete compassion, is one of the Four Immeasurables. In the same vein, in the *Mahābhārata*, an epic in Hindu mythology, Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandava brothers, elevates compassion to one of the main virtues. Such compassion is regarded as natural and essential in the Dharmic religions. On the one hand it is natural because all beings are linked to one another, the individual self (*jīvātman*) is derived from Vishnu and from *Brahmā*, the creator; on the other it is essential because charity maintains the harmony of the cosmic order (*rita*) and prevents chaos. Albeit for different reasons, Christianity and the Indian religions all laud charity.

The fact remains that India has developed a distinct approach to humanitarian aid. To understand this, it is worth looking at how India perceives development aid. Although it distinguishes itself by responding to more structural problems, the ideological basis is the same. According to the website of the Development Partnership Administration at the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA),<sup>3</sup> India’s approach to development is influenced by the country’s struggle for independence, its solidarity with other colonised and developing countries, and Gandhi. The latter declared that his service of India

---

<sup>1</sup> Also known as “Indian religions”, the main ones are Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism.

<sup>2</sup> Colette Poggi, « Quelle charité dans l’hindouisme ? », *Études théologiques et religieuses*, vol. 89, n° 1, 2014, p. 79-105.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, *Overview of India’s Development Partnership*, <https://mea.gov.in/Overview-of-India-Development-Partnership.htm>

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

included “service of humanity”.<sup>4</sup> This approach also fits with the Non-Aligned Movement and Third-Worldism of which India is an integral part. This vision of humanitarian aid thus consists not only of responding to the needs of countries in difficulty but also of establishing equal relations with these countries which should be considered partners. Its uniqueness lies in its elevation of the respect for State sovereignty to being a necessary condition for aid, opposing in theory the criticism levied against Western humanitarian intervention which is sometimes said to lack neutrality and impartiality.<sup>5</sup> Any assistance must therefore be tailored to the countries’ requests (demand-driven aid). It is with this in mind that India opposed the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm,<sup>6</sup> challenging its interventionist aspect.

Like many countries, India defends and respects internationally recognised humanitarian principles. This is notably the case of those defined in Oslo in 1994 – humanity, impartiality, neutrality and respect for State sovereignty. Likewise it is part of its foreign policy and contributes to the country’s “soft power”. If a large number of its beneficiaries are found in its neighbourhood, this is also to maintain or extend its influence in the region. Thus India opposes on paper some of the humanitarian assistance practices of the West, seeing them as interventionist and partisan. We must now look at what this means in practice.

### Rejecting the Western model, India advocates State sovereignty

India’s reluctance to accept the Western view of humanitarian aid does not mean that the country is not involved in humanitarian work. In effect, since Indian Independence in 1947, which signalled the beginning of the country’s humanitarian intervention, the role of the State has been paramount.

This reluctance was marked in 1976 by the Parliament’s adoption of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act,<sup>7</sup> which was consolidated in 2010. This regulation monitors and renders more difficult any collaboration with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) or an international foundation. It gives the government the right to scrutinise and control NGO funds, therefore reinforcing the State’s role as regards international humanitarian aid. The Ministry of Home Affairs must in fact give its consent for NGOs or foundations to obtain foreign donations. By reducing NGO access to donations, the Indian government has cut their funding, preventing foreign powers from having too much sway over its policies.

Besides controlling foreign aid, India does all it can to strengthen its own resilience to humanitarian crises and so assert its independence. That is why in 2005 the Indian government set up an agency to handle disasters (the National Disaster Management Authority – NDMA). This agency, which has a strong presence in India, is proof of the country’s aim to respond to humanitarian catastrophes without external aid, through prevention and action. It is administered by the prime minister and its objective is to focus on aspects other than relief alone, in particular by assisting reconstruction and

---

<sup>4</sup> Gandhi, *Message to American Friends*, 1995: “Therefore, my service of India includes the service of humanity...”.

<sup>5</sup> Delphine Bordier, « Ingérence humanitaire : un débat », in Marie-Dominique Perrot (dir.), *Dérives humanitaires. États d’urgence et droit d’ingérence*, Cahiers de l’IUED, 1994, p. 133-149.

<sup>6</sup> Yeshi Choedon, “India on humanitarian intervention and responsibility to protect: Shifting nuances”, *India Quarterly*, vol. 73, n° 4, December 2017, pp. 430–453.

<sup>7</sup> Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, <https://fcraonline.nic.in/home/index.aspx>

rehabilitation.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the government refers more often to the notion of “disaster relief”<sup>9</sup> and not to humanitarian aid, focusing, initially, on mainly natural problems and less on political ones, such as conflict management for example. This makes it possible once again to differentiate its practices from more Western forms of humanitarian action.

Another aim of the NDMA is to establish a system of logistical and financial assistance at the central-government level for state governments. Thus one of the aspects highlighted in the management of humanitarian crises or natural disasters in India is the role of local players. The MEA also plays an important part. The organisation divides responsibilities between the central level and the decentralised agencies, notably at state level. In New Delhi alone, it is divided into sixteen functional and geographical sections, under the direction of a joint secretary, a secretary of state linked to the central government. The MEA or the prime minister leads the coordination of the different divisions and geographical zones and can make decisions according to specific situations.

In this way, India does not focus its humanitarian efforts on NGO development but rather on local players. Consequently, while the majority of humanitarian action in India takes place in opposition to the Western model, the reason is to give the State and its agencies more room for manoeuvre. Humanitarian assistance can thus be influenced by the international relations objectives of the incumbent government.

### **The Modi era: what is the outlook for humanitarian action?**

India’s economic development and its emergence as a world player are also reflected in its increasing presence in the humanitarian aid sector. Indeed, India is considered as a stakeholder playing one of the key roles in the region, as seen for example after the Nepal earthquake in 2015. Presenting itself as the leader in terms of disaster relief management allows the country to assert itself symbolically as a highly important player. This ambition coincides with the international outreach plans expressed by Narendra Modi’s government since it came to power in 2014. To be considered a donor and no longer a simple recipient is a means of reversing the balance and signalling a break with Indian dependence on Western aid, most notable at the time of Independence in 1947.

State sovereignty, as far as the management of humanitarian aid is concerned, is a way for India to manage aid according to the government’s vision for the country. This is reflected, as already mentioned, in the determination that India holds to be resilient to risks. Prime Minister Narendra Modi lays particular emphasis on this, as we can see in the National Disaster Management Plan of 2016<sup>10</sup> in which he states that “the aim of this plan is to make India disaster resilient”. Apart from this position, as pragmatic (desire for autonomy) as it is symbolic (achieving independence and breaking free from Western aid), it also enables the government to orient its domestic policy. Internally, it is important to note that the control of NGOs by the Indian government should be understood in conjunction with this reaffirmation of the State’s role. Thus India’s position as regards humanitarian aid allows the government to direct this aid

---

<sup>8</sup> National Disaster Management Authority, Annual Report 2020-2021, [https://www.ndma.gov.in/sites/default/files/PDF/Reports/NDMA-Annual-Report\\_20-21.pdf](https://www.ndma.gov.in/sites/default/files/PDF/Reports/NDMA-Annual-Report_20-21.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Claudia Meier and C.S.R. Murthy, *India’s Growing Involvement in Humanitarian Assistance*, Global Public Policy Institute, March 2011, [https://www.gppi.net/media/meier-murthy\\_2011\\_india-growing-involvement-humanitarian-assistance\\_gppi.pdf](https://www.gppi.net/media/meier-murthy_2011_india-growing-involvement-humanitarian-assistance_gppi.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> The National Disaster Management Plan, Government of India, May 2016, <https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/National%20Disaster%20Management%20Plan%20May%202016.pdf>

## HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

according to its vision for the country, centred primarily round the ideology of Hindutvaisation. The government can therefore easily accommodate State sovereigntism in terms of humanitarian aid. In fact, since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power at the end of the 1990s, Hindutva<sup>11</sup> has gained much traction. This process has intensified since 2014 when Modi took office, increasingly so from 2019 when he was re-elected with the BJP without a coalition. However, the direction Indian politics has taken has led to high levels of discrimination against the country's Muslim minority<sup>12</sup> which makes up 14.2% of the population.<sup>13</sup> In view of this, government control over NGOs risks jeopardising the vital role they play in guaranteeing democracy and protecting minorities in India.

India's position on humanitarian assistance also entails exporting its aid to neighbouring countries. It should be stressed that India's role as an international aid exporter is closely embedded in its foreign policy and its vision of international relations. We can see this if we take the example of Afghanistan, a country to which India has supplied aid very recently, after the earthquake in June 2022. Engaging more closely with the Taliban who have taken power in Afghanistan is a strategic move and stems from a pragmatic view of foreign affairs. In fact, Afghanistan enjoys very close relations with Pakistan, India's historical enemy, and is in a strategic geographical position for India. Since it is strongly in Afghanistan's interest to restore relations with India, this rapprochement of the two countries makes sense and enables us therefore to understand the link between foreign policy, domestic interests and humanitarian aid. The latter can also be used as an instrument of foreign policy by India: finally, despite their theoretical distance, Western and Indian practices are more similar than different.

*Translated from the French by Fay Guerry*

---

<sup>11</sup> Hindutva, an ideology which arose in India in the 1920s, promotes the concept of the delimitation of the community forming the Hindu nation.

<sup>12</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *L'Inde de Modi : national-populisme et démocratie ethnique*, Fayard, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Kamala Marius, *L'Inde, une puissance vulnérable*, Le Bréal, 2021. However, the number of Muslims in India is most likely higher than that estimated.

---

### Biographies

**Julien Guillot** • A student at the Bordeaux Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po), Julien Guillot is currently in the second year of a Master's in Risks and Development in the Global South, specialising in Government and Public Action. He is particularly interested in the continent of Africa and in development studies. His degree dissertation focused on unity and diversity in India and included an analysis of the Comoros, two countries he also has a special interest in. As part of an exchange programme, he studied for a year in the Department of International Relations at Mahatma Gandhi University (MGU) in Kottayam, in the state of Kerala, India.

**Justine Penan** • Studying for a Master's in Risks and Development in the Global South, specialising in International Cooperation and Development at the Bordeaux Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po), she has a particular interest in Latin America and Asia. Her dissertation was on the subject of the social unrest in October 2019 in Chile, a country where she spent time on an academic exchange. For the first part of her Master's, she also studied India, analysing the country's main economic, social and political issues. She is currently on a gap year, studying at Amity University, in Rajasthan, India.

**Loé Grandclément** • A student on the joint Franco-German programme at the Bordeaux Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po) and the University of Stuttgart, last year Loé began a Master's degree in Risks and Development in the Global South, with a minor in International Cooperation and Development. The courses in this Master's programme gave her a good understanding of the workings of the development and humanitarian aid systems. With her group she also carried out a country risk analysis of India, with particular emphasis on the political regime and the State, the regional and international integration of India and its social inequalities in relation to gender, caste and religion. She is currently writing a dissertation on feminism in India linked to Subaltern Studies for the University of Stuttgart.

---

*Reproduction prohibited without the agreement of the review Humanitarian Alternatives. To quote this article:*

Julien Guillot, Justine Penan et Loé Grandclément "India through Western eyes: a different way of managing humanitarian aid?", *Humanitarian Alternatives*, no. 21, November 2022, pp. 24–33,.

<https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2022/11/18/india-through-western-eyes-a-different-way-of-managing-humanitarian-aid/>