



Accepting help

Junk the precedent; taking aid from countries for disaster relief is no sign of weakness

The clearest indication so far that India would turn down offers of financial assistance from foreign governments for relief and rehabilitation work in Kerala came on Wednesday. And yet, it only added to the confusion. The Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson said that “in line with the existing policy”, the Central government would meet requirements in Kerala through “domestic efforts”. Various governments have made specific offers to Kerala, from about ₹700 crore from the UAE to about ₹35 lakh from the Maldives. The spokesperson added that only PIOs, NRIs or international foundations could send money from overseas to the Prime Minister’s or Chief Minister’s relief fund. But as Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan indicated, this clarity about existing policy is missing in the Central government’s National Disaster Management Plan. Put out in 2016, the Plan states that India will not appeal for foreign aid in the wake of a disaster. But it goes on to say: “... 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.” The condition applies that the Union Home Ministry would consult the MEA and assess the requirements “that the foreign teams can provide”. So, what exactly is government policy? Is it laid out in the NDMP document that has an opening message from Prime Minister Modi? Or is it based on the decision of the UPA government to refuse aid or assistance in the wake of the 2004 tsunami – a decision born out of a sense of false pride and a misplaced sense of shame – that became a sort of convention thereafter?

It is not only this mismatch between convention and written document that has created space for the current controversy. Irrespective of what was agreed upon in the past, democracies should be supple enough to respond to emergencies in ways that benefit the greater common good. It serves well no citizen of India for the government to stand on mere precedent or pride to turn down genuine offers of help, in terms of funds or expert teams – or to even ask for help. Offers of aid from foreign governments must naturally be scrutinised to see if they compromise national security and other interests. But to stand on notions of self-reliance in a multilateral world, to spurn a helping hand, is to be beholden to a strange pride. There is no shame in taking help, just as there should be no hesitation in offering it. India has a longstanding tradition of rushing help elsewhere. Leaving Centre-State politics, if any, aside, the government should not just gracefully accept the assistance for Kerala, it should junk the 2004 precedent.

Where guilt lies

Donald Trump may brazen through his close aides’ convictions, but he is definitely shaken

The long-term survivability of the Donald Trump administration fell into doubt this week after two of the U.S. President’s former associates came under the shadow of guilt for eight separate felonies each, all serious political and financial crimes. First, Mr. Trump’s former attorney and self-declared “fix-it guy”, Michael Cohen, pleaded guilty to campaign finance violations, admitting that “at the direction of a candidate” of the 2016 presidential campaign he made \$130,000 in “hush money” payments to stop porn star Stormy Daniels from going public about an alleged extramarital affair. Second, Mr. Trump’s former campaign manager Paul Manafort was found guilty on charges of bank and tax fraud relating to his role as a political consultant for pro-Russian entities in Ukraine. While he faces a separate criminal trial in the investigation led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller on possible Russian collusion in the 2016 election, his conviction pertained to undisclosed income and bank accounts, and illegal borrowings associated with his Ukrainian operations. Mr. Trump appeared to shrug off the impact that these high-profile convictions could have on his administration, even tweeting that unlike Mr. Cohen, Mr. Manafort “refused to break” under prosecutorial pressure and that he had “such respect for a brave man!”

While it may be the case that Mr. Trump’s proximity to these events makes him an “undicted co-conspirator”, experts believe the President is immune from routine criminal prosecution while he holds office. The second potential course of action for the prosecution is to rely on Congress to impeach him if there is evidence of wrongdoing. Whether Congress would do so is unclear. Even if the House of Representatives comes under the control of Democrats after the November mid-term elections, there is little doubt that a Republican-controlled Senate, where a two-thirds “super majority” is required to convict a person being impeached, would expediently nix any such proceedings or acquit Mr. Trump. The Republican Party cannot be unaware that it currently lacks decisive leadership at the top, and that Mr. Trump has singlehandedly rallied conservatives of all shades around its banner as no other candidate could. Why would they spoil his innings? Historically, impeachments have begun strongly at the House, but success or failure has depended on which party controlled the Senate. Three Presidents have faced the proceedings and two of them, Andrew Johnson in 1868 and Bill Clinton in 1998, were impeached but got acquitted by the Senate. In 1974, Richard Nixon resigned when it became certain his impeachment would pass both chambers. Mr. Trump may also consider presidential pardons for Mr. Cohen and Mr. Manafort, as he did for conservative provocateurs Dinesh D’Souza and Joe Arpaio. Yet there is a lack of legal precedent on whether he could pardon himself.

Why history matters so much

Its importance in shaping our political ethos is undiminished, but the subject has no place in the competitive education culture



KRISHNA KUMAR

Why is history such an important school subject? And why does it not receive the importance it deserves? These two were among the major questions debated at a conference recently held in Kolkata. A brief answer to the second question is that history cannot compete with science subjects in the market that shapes and controls education today. Yet, history is an important subject because it moulds the outlook of the younger generation. By turning the past into a narrative, history creates a public ethos and influences culture. From architecture to film, and from ancient India to Partition, the Kolkata conference, organised by the History for Peace initiative of the Seagull Foundation for the Arts, covered a broad canvas to trace the complex relationship between history and culture.

I can think of few other gatherings where school teachers got a chance to discuss their classroom experience with scholars of history and culture. The outcome was a richer understanding of the constraints that a poorly functioning system of education places on a society’s capacity to cope with its present difficulties and imagine sustainable solutions.

Debates over texts

The history syllabus and textbooks have been at the heart of a deep political controversy in India. India is not alone in this respect. No

country in the world is immune to debates about the past and how it should be presented to school children. To take just two instances, America’s discomfort with Hiroshima and Britain’s discomfort with Gandhi continue to be reflected in their school syllabi.

The main reason why portrayal of the past in school textbooks arouses controversy is that a publicly shared past imparts a collective memory and identity. Textbooks are viewed as officially approved documents – even if they are privately produced and have no official sanction – and are therefore believed to be associated with state power. Significantly, they do shape the perceptions of the young because children are impressionable. Children introduced to a certain version of the past at school acquire a disposition which can be politically mobilised in the future.

Debates over school textbooks seldom take into account the significance of curricular design and the preparation of a syllabus. When criticising poor quality textbooks, people do not recognise that the problem may be at the level of syllabus and curriculum. Similarly, when good textbooks are appreciated, people seldom realise the effort required in redesigning the curriculum and syllabus.

The new history textbooks brought out by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) from 2006 onwards are a case in point. They have survived the change of government. One reason for their longevity is their professional quality. They have no single authors. Teams of eminent historians worked through deliberation and dialogue, first drafting a new syllabus and then the text itself. They



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represent the spirit of the National Curriculum Framework, 2005, which is still in place, which gives precedence to inquiry through direct exposure to evidence. The textbooks based on it do not narrate a long story. Instead, they enable children to explore different, often divergent, themes, such as lives of peasants and women, architectural styles, etc. Archival material is cited as evidence, and debates among historians are highlighted to demonstrate the difficulties of interpreting evidence.

Problem of perception

These books mark a major step forward in the teaching of history, but older ways of teaching and conventional textbooks have persisted. As a presentation at the Kolkata conference pointed out, the history teacher at school is often someone who has not studied history or enjoyed it. So, despite a shift in historiography, old problems continue to affect the system. One of these is the perception that history is all about wars, kings and dates. Another is the tenacity of dividing India’s past into three long chunks: ancient, medieval

and modern. These categories flatten out the complexity and richness of India’s history, wasting the opportunity of studying it with the aim of arousing curiosity and imparting tools of inquiry. The examination system also reinforces flat perceptions by asking questions that are best answered with the help of guidebooks. The 2005 curricular revolution has made little impact on this wider scene.

In most States, the use of history to build collective memory and identity continues. Assam-like situations suggest that education is not perceived as a means of resolving a problem. The fear that incoming migrants would push the regional language into minority status or hurt the State’s cultural identity shows how poor the State’s trust in education is.

On the contrary, schools are actively engaged in creating a delusion of an ongoing collective ‘self’ which thrives on a monolithic ‘other’. Teachers of social sciences work in an atmosphere of relentless regimentation of children’s bodies, thoughts and emotions. Fear pervades life at school, taking many forms. It forms the core of

the intensely competitive environment that our schools, including the most reputed ones, love to sustain. In that environment, the teacher’s attempt to make children reflective and sensitive to details gets drowned in the din of everyday life.

The importance of history

Schooling adds a dimension to culture that we do not quite understand. As public institutions, schools carry many burdens the society is not always aware of. Government schools cope with bureaucratic norms and private schools cope with parental pressure to maintain heightened competition. The natural sciences bear the brunt of this pressure. For the growing middle class, including the vast multitude of first-generation educated, science and mathematics represent the golden route to high income jobs in medicine and engineering, including information technology. The social sciences and humanities do not figure in this landscape, yet they also suffer the consequences of the command that the entrance test culture wields over schools.

Although history has no place in the competitive culture of education, its importance in shaping the larger political ethos of the country remains undiminished. Children depend on adults to learn about the past, and that is what makes history the most challenging school subject. Ironically, poorly taught history matters even more than well-taught history, simply because when history does not arouse curiosity or impart the tools of analysis, it creates an emotional barrier for further inquiry.

Krishna Kumar is a former director of the NCERT

Get over the superpower syndrome

No one will think India is any more powerful if it turns away foreign assistance for flood-hit Kerala



T.P. SREENIVASAN

The current debate on whether foreign assistance should be accepted for relief and reconstruction work following the devastating floods in Kerala is an unnecessary distraction for the Central and State governments at a time of a grave crisis. The need now is to use all assistance, Indian and foreign, to rebuild Kerala. The figures being bandied about will not meet even a fraction of the cost of rebuilding the infrastructure and bringing the State to normalcy. Bilateral and multilateral assistance will take a long time in coming, and the sooner we make up our mind the better. Seeing ghosts of spies, interventionists and terrorists will not help us recover and be productive once again.

Dreams of the high table

It was the United Progressive Alliance government that decided not to seek external assistance for disaster relief – from foreign coun-

tries or even the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The context of that decision was India’s superpower dream. It was felt that India should demonstrate that it had the strength to withstand and counter calamities and also help its neighbours, as it did in the case of the December 2004 tsunami and piracy attacks in the Indian Ocean. India had felt that this would strengthen its case for seeking to be a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and also hasten the prospect of superpower status by 2020. Since permanent membership of the Security Council entails additional financial commitment on its part, India’s low level of mandatory contribution to the UN, calculated based on its capacity to pay, was also a matter of concern at that time. India thought it would be beneficial for it if it were to show that it was spending money abroad over and above the mandatory contribution.

But the policy of not accepting foreign assistance has not taken India even one step towards fulfilling its ambitions. It has been given admission into the Australia Group and the Wassenaar Arrangement it did not want, and the Missile Technology Control Re-



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game because its system of missile control was unmatchable, but not membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group or even the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation.

Fearing the foreign hand

The other concern was the old fear of the foreign hand, the spies who would come with the package, interfere in the country’s internal affairs, and also take away valuable information. The development of technology is such that foreigners do not need to come in hordes to India to know what is happening or to influence decision-making here. Google and Facebook know more about us than we do, and are capable of manipulating our na-

tional priorities and plans. India should not be mixing up its 20th century fears with the realities of the 21st century.

The assistance from the UN and Red Cross are of less concern. India has been the biggest contributor to the UN Development Programme and the biggest recipient of assistance. It is a party to the regulations of the UN and its conditionalities for assistance. It is true that India does not want foreigners with huge UN salaries to come and destroy the morale of its relief workers. But its needs for technology and best practices can be obtained from the UN by careful planning and consultations. India will also be able to choose the nationalities of the people it deploys. Nothing should stop it from getting what it needs from the UN, as they can raise the funds and source them from anywhere.

In the case of bilateral assistance, India needs to examine offers case by case. The reported offer from the United Arab Emirates of ₹700 crore makes Abu Dhabi a bigger donor than New Delhi. This is not a casual offer routinely made. First of all, the UAE authorities genuinely felt grieved over the calamity that hit Keralites, who have served their country well over the years. They felt obliged to

help Kerala at a time of distress in accordance with the Islamic faith. Similar is the case of Qatar, which has offered ₹35 crore.

The news that the Government of India would decline the offer came like a tornado after the flood. Such a decision will be very unpopular in Kerala and it will affect the electoral fortunes of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Such an inflexible attitude on the basis of an earlier decision will not be appreciated. This may also have a negative impact on India’s relations with the UAE, whose authorities were directly involved in raising the funds and in conveying the offer to the Prime Minister.

Look for best practices

Now there are reports that the gift from the UAE has not been rejected out of hand. This would be wise. India should also hold discussions with the UN and the Red Cross with a view to formulating plans for reconstruction using the latest technology and international best practices. It should set aside its superpower syndrome at a time of national emergency.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Accepting foreign funds

Neither does the Centre seem willing to donate more to Kerala nor is it accepting liberal donations from foreign countries (“Accept ₹700 cr. UAE offer or compensate us, says Kerala,” August 23). Policies are designed by us and can be changed according to the circumstances and needs of the people. At a time when the people of Kerala have lost their homes and livelihoods and are eagerly awaiting basic necessities, the Modi government’s reluctance to accept the UAE’s donation seems harsh.

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO,
Hyderabad

On the one hand, the State government’s stance shows the Indian government in poor light. It conveys the idea that India is incapable of meeting its own citizens’ urgent requirements and

has to depend on others. On the other hand, the Centre does not seem to have understood the full gravity of the situation in Kerala; its contribution is meagre. Though the statement of the External Affairs Ministry, that the government will meet Kerala’s needs through domestic efforts, sounds good on paper, the fact is that rehabilitation has to be undertaken on a war footing. The State needs a lot of funds to repair the damaged infrastructure and help people rebuild their lives. Perhaps the Centre could treat the offer of assistance from other countries as loans to be reimbursed later. This way the Centre will not be compromising on the nation’s self-esteem and will also help the State limp back to normal.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

Warmth and outrage

It is really surprising that Navjot Singh Sidhu’s gesture has invited such stinging criticism by sections of the media and from many people (“If we don’t want goodwill, then why have embassies?”, August 23). Both the past NDA government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the present NDA government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi have done a lot to build good relations with Pakistan. Vajpayee travelled to Lahore by bus; Mr. Modi landed in Lahore on a surprise visit and hugged the then Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif. Given that jingoism is growing by the day, Mr. Sidhu could also go to different parts of India and give speeches on the importance of building an atmosphere where there is no room for hatred.

KATURU DURGA PRASAD RAO,
Hyderabad

Mr. Sidhu says that Pakistan Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa told him that Pakistan was contemplating opening a passage from Dera Baba Nanak to Kartarpur Sahib to facilitate pilgrims to pay obeisance on the occasion of the 550th Parkash Diwas. As Mr. Sidhu’s visit was neither political nor official, it is curious why the Army Chief told him this and why Mr. Sidhu came back and announced this initiative.

BHAGABAN NAYAK,
Ganjam

Much to be desired

The article raises a pertinent question: why do Indians settled abroad do great academic work while their counterparts in India lag behind (“In search of greatness”, August 23)? The reasons are not far to seek. Universities and workplaces outside India offer more freedom to do great work and are not influenced by

political clout as is the case here. Right from our education system to government control of education, the lack of a vibrant culture of scientific research and education in our universities, and allocation of funds, there is much to be desired. We need a paradigm shift in teaching methods. We also need to encourage questioning and independent thinking.

R. PRABHU RAJ,
Bengaluru

Not a theocracy

To suggest imprisoning a person for life for acts of sacrilege against holy texts is preposterous (“Retrograde move”, August 23). India is not a theocratic state to take offence on behalf of religious groups and punish people for perceived or factual slights to religious texts. It should only concern itself with

maintaining law and order when there are tensions between religious groups.

D. RAMESH,
Secunderabad

The decision is unfortunate. First, what constitutes sacrilege is itself ambiguous. Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code criminalises “deliberate and malicious acts to outrage religious feelings.” How do you prove that an act was deliberate and not ignorant? Does everyone follow what these holy texts preach? Won’t omissions also be considered sacrilegious? And now the Cabinet wants to introduce a new section! Such regressive provisions are against the idea of secularism, which is part of the basic structure of the Constitution.

SHREYASHI PANJA,
New Delhi

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