

In Praise of the Indian Government's response to Leh's Flash Floods

Whether it is the continuous criticism, the sense of duty, the desire to prove itself and the recently passed Disaster Management Bill, or simply basic human compassion, the Government's approach toward Disaster Management and definitely successful Disaster Management has improved tremendously. It proved this in its reaction to the unprecedented and climatically anomalous flash floods that struck the Leh district of Ladakh at 1 a.m. on the morning of Friday, 6th August.

Where in the past, as in the 2006 Mumbai floods, the Government had to be *asked* for aid, this time not only did the government show remarkable accuracy in reacting to the situation, but also surprising organizational efficiency. Following the disaster, in which the Leh airstrip was damaged, preventing planes from being able to land, instead of wasting time and resources in sending in a limited quantity of workers and supplies by helicopter, the Government contacted the nearest possible aid, the army (read: And not the Army contacted the Government). Within hours, no less than 22 army units, most stationed in Kargil and the mountains bordering Tibet and Pakistan, had made their way to the affected villages in spite of casualties in their ranks in getting there. Here, they were assisted by the local police and before anything else had restored the Leh airstrip, moved all uninjured people to the surrounding plains where they would be protected from further damage and injured people to their own army hospitals for treatment. Following this, with a restored airstrip, supplies and State and Central government workers, were quick to alight at Leh and quicker to set up camps where more than 2,000 people are still being given humanitarian aid.

The initial disaster management taken care of, secondary and long term measures were quick to follow. These were in the form of the local governing bodies, The Ladakh Buddhist Association and The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, The Central Government's National Disaster Management Authority and Defense Sector's National Disaster Response Force and the Chief Minister and Tourism Minister of Ladakh themselves. The local governing bodies saw to it that survivors, locals, tourists, Indians, Foreigners, Buddhists and Muslims alike had access to food, water and shelter, and the people had the comfort of knowing that aid would be coming from the government's and not their neighbors' pantries as in Mumbai in 2006. Aid was flown in from Delhi and Chandigarh by the National Disaster Management Authority and National Disaster Response Force as soon as the airport became operational. P Chidambaram, the Home Minister, rather than sitting back and exclaiming, "These things happen in big cities" saw to it that no less than 6,000 relief workers reached Leh within the day. The Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Omar Abdullah and other Centre and State Ministers flew in, spoke personally to many victims and announced to the rescuers that their primary objective would now be to find missing people who might still be alive. Monetary aid *actually came* from the Centre and State, in generous figures, rather than the hollow promises of it, which would end up being denied 26 years later (Bhopal Gas Tragedy).

The tireless rescue operations are still going on, despite the numerous topographical obstacles. The number of missing people is rapidly decreasing.

This disaster could in no way have been predicted. And thus, the Government and Ministers' reactions deserve a high commendation indeed. If, where countless times in

the past, predictable disasters have been ignored and rescue efforts delayed, Leh, a district in which not moments before the calamity the political, religious and defensive turmoil prevented the fraternity of man and man, a district which at a height of 3,500 metres can scarcely be called accessible, a district which borders a region of continuous conflict, a mountain district which has never in the past received even a fifth of the rain it received on the 6th, has been so capably rescued, I believe the Government has progressed to a far more professional level of Disaster Management than anything we have witnessed in the past. I say the Government showed 'surprising' organizational efficiency in reacting; perhaps in the years to come this word will not have to be used.

Ishaan Jhaveri
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