

# GLOBAL INDIA

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## STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC OVERSIGHT: AN ANALYSIS OF PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS ON INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME<sup>1</sup>

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'Legislation, Oversight, Representation and Budgeting' are the key functions of the Indian Parliament. After the executive (Prime Minister and Union Council of Ministers), the 788 Members of Parliament (MPs) - 245 in the Upper House (Rajya Sabha) and 543 in the Lower House (Lok Sabha), are the next most important set of actors in the country's policy-making process. In order to carry out these functions, MPs have avenues such as asking questions, and being part of Standing Committees and parliamentary discussions or debates (PRS Legislative Research, 2008). This policy brief examines one of these tools – Parliament Questions (PQs) – to understand how MPs have used it to highlight issues around India's development cooperation (foreign aid) programme.

This paper provides background information on India's position as a development partner in the Global South, followed by an analysis of all parliamentary questions directed towards the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on India's development assistance programme from March 2000 to March 2019 (covering almost four government terms). The next section highlights MPs' concerns regarding the country's aid-giving as reflected in the questions they asked, segregated by their political party affiliation. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations for MPs and others interested in using PQs to better understand India's overseas development programme.

The suggestions broadly focus on: publicly available sources that can be referred to at the time of drafting PQs, the role that MPs can play in improving the effectiveness of aid programmes, and efforts they can make to inform their constituencies about government expenditures on India's overseas development assistance programme.

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## A BRIEF BACKGROUND ON INDIA AS A LEADING DEVELOPMENT PARTNER IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH<sup>2</sup>

“As one of the globally significant players, I see the country’s foreign policy maturing. We had simple beginnings, then expanded our abilities and experiences in Africa and Asia, upholding South-South Cooperation (SSC). We became self-reliant and started expanding – to a point where our aid programs are of relevance globally,” said Amb (Retd.) Ranjan Mathai, former Foreign Secretary of India,<sup>3</sup> in an interview with the researcher in January 2020. India has taken up development cooperation soon after it gained independence in 1947, as part of the Colombo Plan Collective. The focus from then until the early 2000s was mostly on sharing skills and human resources, through programmes such as the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme (ITEC, started in 1964), building on work done with certain neighbours earlier. ITEC was part of an approach to South-South Cooperation (SSC) long before the phrase came into popular use. The country moved from imparting skills to technical training programs, scholarships, funding institutions, and then supporting projects through grants and concessional loans. In more recent years the country has added

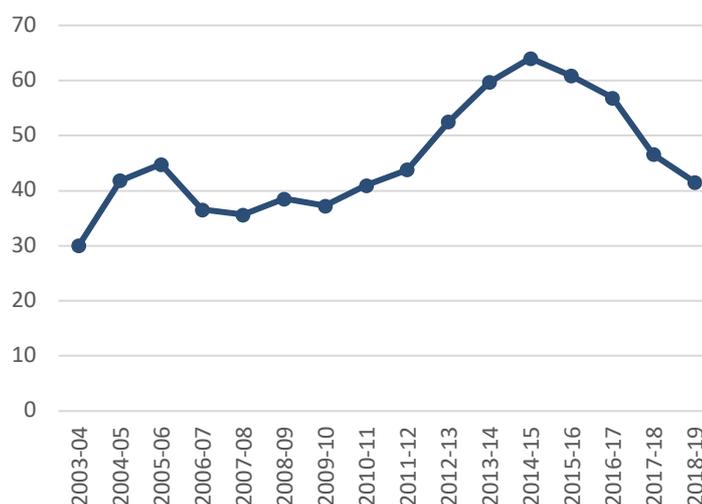
<sup>2</sup> For more background on India’s development assistance programme, see <https://globalindia.eu/policy-paper/enhancing-the-effectiveness-of-indias-development-partnership-practices/>

Budget Allocation of MEA for various forms of partnership activities India undertakes (in INR Crores)

Source: Annual Reports



Percentage of Development Assistance component within MEA budget



<sup>3</sup> Foreign Secretary of India from 1 August 2011 to 31 July 2013.

major commercial and financial loans through Export-Import Bank of India.

As the charts illustrate, the total amount of assistance and its share of the MEA's total budget has been increasing – from ₹1025.64 crores (30% of MEA's budget) in 2003-04 to ₹7038 crores in 2013-14 (59.67%). The following two financial years saw further increases in the aid budget, which grew to over 60% of the MEA budget, before declining to 41% in 2018-19. In 2019-20, the total funds allocated for grants and concessional loans amounted to ₹7,517.79 crore (around US\$986 million) which is 42% of MEA's budget,<sup>4</sup> an increase of approximately ₹2,000 crores (just above US\$262 million) from the previous year.<sup>5</sup>

On 6<sup>th</sup> February 2019, in response to a PQ on the amount that India had spent on its development assistance programme, the government said that 274 Lines of Credit (LoCs) amounting to US\$26.79 billion, had been issued from 2005-06 to January 2019. These LoCs, in various sectors, have been extended to 63 countries – 189 LoCs (worth US\$11.36 billion) in Africa, 53 LoCs (worth US\$14.47 billion) in Asia, and 32 LoCs (worth US\$970.53 million) in Latin America, Oceania and Commonwealth for Independent States (CIS) countries. The government has also supported small development projects (SDPs), equivalent to US\$200 million on 536 projects

from 2006 onwards in Afghanistan, 51 SDPs in Sri Lanka, 200 in Nepal from 2008 to 2017, 2,546 projects in Bhutan from 2008 to 2018, 5 in Bangladesh, 5 in Myanmar, together with a handful in some of the smaller states in the Oceanic region (MEA, GoI, 2019).

As is clear from the discussion above, development assistance is an important element in India's budget, hence democratic supervision of these expenditures is important for political accountability and transparency.

### PARTICIPATION OF MPs AND POLITICAL PARTIES

A keyword search in the Ministry of External Affairs' [online archives](#) using the words 'aid', 'development aid' and 'development partnership' identified 54 questions (starred or oral and unstarred or written) from both Houses of the Indian Parliament. The selection process (through a lottery system) in the Indian Parliament has some limitations, as not all questions submitted by MPs get selected and thereafter get listed on the website. The research does, however, draw from questions actually asked to the Ministry. An analysis of the listed PQs, which is an oversight tool for holding government accountable, can provide researchers with an indication of areas of interest for policy-makers and elected

<sup>4</sup> ₹17884.75 Crores being the total budget as per MEA's Detailed Demands for Grants 2019-20

<sup>5</sup> <https://meadashboard.gov.in/indicators/92>

representatives (Singh, 2017; Otjes and Louwerse, 2018).

The table below provides an overview of the number of questions directed to MEA, in both Parliament Houses, on development assistance, as against the total number of questions asked to the ministry. As seen in the earlier section, funding for development cooperation ranges between 30% to 64% of the MEA's budget. On the face of it, the relatively small number of questions selected do not do justice to the amount spent on Official Development Assistance (ODA) by the country.

Of the 54 questions the search yielded, 22 were asked during the five years of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) II government (2014-19). This is one more than the number of questions asked (21) of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance's (UPA I and II - 2004 to 2014) ten years of government and 10 more than the NDA I time period (11

questions from 1999 to 2004). Looking at this increase, it can be said that in the last five years, compared to the previous decade, MPs have become more vocal regarding India's role as a donor.

Such an increased interest can be attributed to several external and internal factors. External factors include India's growing concern over China's escalating economic presence and aid in neighbouring countries, and decreased dependency of South Asian neighbours on India. Internal factors include an increase in overseas direct investment by Indian businesses, and increased visibility of Indian-supported projects, especially in Indian media, and in the social media of Indian diplomatic offices in recipient countries. Further analysis of the kinds of questions posed in Parliament sheds additional light on the relative importance of these and other factors amongst MPs and across political parties.

Lok Sabha Session ( <a href="#">Source: Lok Sabha website</a> )			Rajya Sabha Session ( <a href="#">source: MEA, GoI website</a> )	Number of Questions on development cooperation in both the houses
Lok Sabha	Total questions asked	Number of questions asked to MEA	Number of questions asked to MEA	
XIII (Nov 1999- Feb 2004)	73424	1947	1595	11
XIV (July 2004-Feb 2009) and XV (July 2009-Feb 2014)	66371 and 79401	1239 and 1507	2127	21
XVI (July 2014-Feb 2019)	79149	1415	1079	22

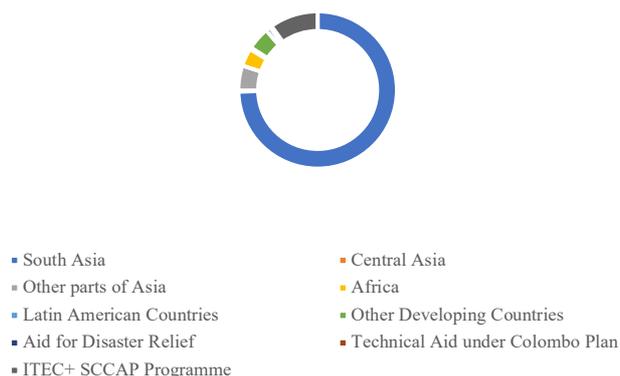
65 MPs were involved in putting forth these 54 questions, where 9 questions were asked by more than one MP, as a group. Looking at these MPs' parties, the two prominent national-level parties the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) had 18 and 17 members respectively asking these questions, followed by 9 members from the Telugu Desam Party and 7 by the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam members, both regional parties from South India. The increase in the number of questions asked in the last four years is a positive development. Nevertheless, research on public awareness on this issue shows that only elites, such as current and former policymakers, think-tank researchers, INGOs/city-based NGOs, journalists etc. are aware of India's ODA (Mawdsley, 2014).

### INSIGHTS FROM THE PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

The examined parliamentary questions highlight India's strategic interest. For example, South Asia has been a very important region for India, receiving almost 75% of the country's aid in 2016-17 as seen in the image below. The prominence of the region within the aid budget is reflected in parliamentary questions, with 28 of all questions asked of the Ministers being related to aid for this region. Breaking this down further, questions were mostly related to Nepal,

Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, all of which are prime recipients of Indian aid.

**Financial Aid from India in 2016-17**  
(As per Response given to Parliament Question No. 2449 on August 01, 2018)



Other questions concerned China's activities as an aid provider and its impact on India's interests. For example, Dr Kanwar Deep Singh of the All India Trinamool Congress (a national-level party) asked "[\*whether similar to China, India is trying to play a strategic role in the development of Africa in order to tap the massive economic and strategic potential of the continent.\*](#)" Another question, by Dr Anju Bala of the BJP, asked "[\*whether the Government has taken initiatives to increase India's engagements with African countries; if so, the details thereof, country-wise during the last five years.\*](#)" Similarly, a question by Mr. Palvai Govardhan Reddy, an INC leader, was about "[\*the Ministry's reaction to China pipping India and becoming the top aid donors to Kathmandu.\*](#)" These questions highlight that parliamentarians, like policymakers, are looking

at India as a donor that has to compete with China and make a mark for itself in the region through its development assistance programme.

The general nature of the questions asked by MPs is noteworthy. Most questions didn't adequately utilise the detailed information available in the Ministry's Annual Reports – they were often seeking information already available in the public domain. Further, they were not specific and pointed enough to provoke revealing responses from the government. Perhaps as a consequence, the government's responses were often vague and general, and able to gloss over inconvenient facts.

Financial aid, other grants, development projects etc. were most frequently included in government responses, followed by Lines of Credit and soft loans. The absence of a clear categorisation of aid by India may also have contributed to differences in information provided at different times. This conceptual ambiguity around the composition of India's aid has been highlighted by scholars and OECD Development Assistance Committee donors, who have pointed out that the country's aid categorisation isn't well defined, and mixes up aid with geopolitical manoeuvres and commerce (Mawdsley 2010, p. 8).

About five questions sought answers on the impact or outcome of Indian-supported projects

– for both the recipient countries and India – including how these projects will help in improving relations between India and the beneficiary states.

On the aid-giving process and institutional arrangements for aid-giving, some questions focused on the mechanisms used in implementing and monitoring India's assistance programme, and the role that the Development Partnership Administration was playing in this process.

MPs have an important role to play in making their constituencies aware of India's aid programme. By asking more relevant questions, thus increasing the likelihood of them getting selected, and by using other spaces provided by the Indian Parliament, MPs can help increase transparency and accountability concerning development aid policy and practices of India. For example, questions by Tamil Nadu MPs on Sri Lankan Tamils and the assistance (grants and humanitarian aid) provided to them by India (eight questions in the studied time period), help in taking forward the concerns of the constituencies they represent. Furthermore, in this way they also ensure that Indian aid contributes to the effective growth and development of recipient states' and their people.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The same questions are often repeated over the years by different MPs, and some questions are generic in nature. It is recommended that MPs ask specific questions, allowing them to hold the government more accountable. PQs can be framed based on the information provided in the Annual Reports of the MEA.<sup>6</sup> Another important set of documents that can be referred to are the reports by the Standing Committee on External Affairs and Demands for Grants from the Lok Sabha website.<sup>7</sup>

2. Aid-giving processes in India might not provide space for MPs to engage in the preparation or design stages of projects in recipient countries. However, parliamentary oversight tools can be used to check on the implementation and reviewing processes of these projects. In doing so, MPs can play a crucial role in ensuring that India delivers on its aid-giving commitments on time, so that situations where long delays occur (because of both internal and external reasons) can be avoided.

3. MPs should focus on questions related to the impact and long-term outcomes of aid projects supported by India. At present, the development assistance programme of the

country does not have a formal, structured monitoring and evaluation system in place. Drawing the government's attention to this lacuna by elected leaders in the central legislature will strengthen the country's aid programme over time.

4. Despite the huge amount of money that is allocated to the country's development assistance programme under the MEA budget, the issue has not yet garnered much-needed public attention. MPs can use various social media and online news platforms to create awareness amongst the public. They can share parliament questions on development aid that are selected, and the responses received, and also those that were not selected.

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<sup>6</sup> Link to access the Annual Reports is: [https://www.mea.gov.in/annual-reports.htm?57/Annual Reports](https://www.mea.gov.in/annual-reports.htm?57/Annual%20Reports)

<sup>7</sup> Link to access these reports is: [http://loksabhaph.nic.in/Committee/reports\\_page.aspx?tab=6](http://loksabhaph.nic.in/Committee/reports_page.aspx?tab=6)

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