

RIFT OVER RELIEF: ON THE RAIN-CAUSED DAMAGE IN TAMIL NADU AND THE CENTRAL AND TAMIL NADU GOVERNMENTS INTERACTIONS

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The [recent spat between the central and Tamil Nadu governments](#) over flood relief after two spells of heavy rainfall in the State has been disheartening for those struggling to rebuild their lives. The [duel between Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and State Minister for Youth Welfare Udhayanidhi Stalin](#) over semantics should not have arisen, with the focus and energy devoted to ensuring the return of normality to the southern districts of the State that were overwhelmed on December 17 and 18. Fortunately, better wisdom prevailed with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assurance to Chief Minister M.K. Stalin of the Centre's support. Mr. Stalin, had, prior to this, in a meeting with Mr. Modi in New Delhi, [sought interim relief funds of 7,033 crore](#) and [a final relief fund of 12,659 crore](#) for the damage caused earlier by Cyclone Michaung to the Chennai area. He also wanted 2,000 crore from the PM's National Relief Fund (for the southern districts). The State has sought 21,692 crore in total from the Union government.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had earlier carried out an aerial survey over the Chennai area and announced the release of the second instalment of 450 crore to the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF). The Centre has also sanctioned 500 crore for a flood mitigation project in Chennai. The State is now awaiting a fresh central announcement after visits by inter-ministerial teams to the affected areas. As Ms. Sitharaman pointed out in her press conference, the central government does not declare any natural disaster a national disaster. It is only after an assessment by its team that any natural disaster is classified as a disaster of severe nature — as seen in the 2013 floods in Uttarakhand and 2018 floods in Kerala. In such a case, there is additional financial assistance from the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF). So, there is no question of calling the floods in Tamil Nadu as a "national disaster". The central government should ensure clear guidelines when it comes to relief. It should also consider revising its position on excluding long term or permanent restoration works from the ambit of the SDRF/NDRF. There must be an open debate on the suggestion by a parliamentary committee in March 2021 that States hit by severe disaster be permitted to use more than the 25% flexi-fund component of centrally sponsored schemes to carry out post-disaster permanent restoration works. As micro, small and medium enterprises get no relief under the norms of the two funds, the Centre should ensure relief to this sector, which employs nearly 1.4 crore people in the State. Finally, the Centre must consult cyclone-vulnerable Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, West Bengal and Gujarat and formulate new norms on disaster management that would leave no room for political controversy.

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