

## **Navigating the Audience Costs of Humanitarian Aid for Rising States: A Case Study of India's COVID-19 Response**

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*Rising states often face critical decisions about accepting or refusing humanitarian aid during crises, shaped by domestic and international audience costs. This study examines these dynamics through the lens of audience cost theory, using India's responses during the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study. During the first wave, India refused aid, supported by low audience costs and high stateness, reflecting confidence in self-reliance. However, the second wave's devastating surge in cases and healthcare system collapse increased domestic dissatisfaction and international pressure, raising audience costs and diminishing stateness. This shift compelled India to accept aid, demonstrating the interplay between audience costs and stateness in determining aid strategies. The findings highlight how states with high stateness can mitigate audience costs, while those with low stateness face greater vulnerability to domestic and international pressures. This study contributes to the understanding of the political dynamics of aid responses in rising powers, showing that such decisions extend beyond humanitarian needs and involve strategic calculations influenced by sovereignty and global expectations. The research underscores the importance of multilateral frameworks that account for these complexities, enabling more effective global cooperation in future crises. By analyzing India's aid responses, this study offers insights into the broader implications for global governance and crisis management, advancing the understanding of how rising states navigate crises while balancing internal and external pressures. The findings indicate that aid responses are influenced by political contexts, prompting further study on their interaction with audience costs, stateness, and aid strategies in international relations.*

*Keywords: humanitarian aid, rising states, stateness, aid refusal, audience cost*

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## 1. Introduction

Although states in humanitarian crises are often offered foreign aid, they do not always accept it. Aid refusal is rarely investigated in the literature because scholars often regard it as an illegitimate topic (Hagen, Jamie J., et al., 2023). However, some studies have indicated that aid refusal can help a state improve its reputation by signaling its capacity and self-reliance to the international community without war (Carnegie & Dolan, 2020). Nevertheless, because a state's international reputation tends to be stable, this factor alone cannot explain the state's different responses to temporally similar crises. India is an intriguing case in that it refused aid during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic but accepted aid during the second wave.

In contrast to studies focusing on state capacity and reputation, this study presents a novel approach to examine aid refusal in terms of the "audience cost of aid refusal." Empirically, policymakers prioritize international audiences or domestic audiences when making aid decisions, and they reject some or all aid to avoid unnecessary diplomatic or security costs. The causal mechanism behind India's initial refusal of COVID-19 aid could be explained by evaluating the anticipated audience cost of aid at both the domestic and international levels.

At a theoretical level, this study attempted to apply audience cost theory, which posits that anticipated audience costs shape a state's aid response to a crisis. Specifically, audience cost theory was improved and updated by including the variable of stateness. The findings of this study can enhance the understanding of international actors that refuse aid. The process-tracing method was also applied to analyze causal processes across space and over time for the dynamic situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Aid refusal can be explained by tracing the political, economic, and social processes in the chains leading to a reaction to humanitarian assistance. This method was applied in a case study for the state of India.

In the face of a humanitarian crisis, India sometimes accepts humanitarian assistance but sometimes refuses it (Miller & Mukundan, 2021). For example, when an earthquake or flood occurs, a state may require short-term humanitarian assistance, such as food and water, temporary shelter, and health services. Before 2004, India received aid from foreign governments for various disasters, including the Uttarkashi earthquake (1991), the Latur earthquake (1993), the Gujarat earthquake (2001), the Bengal cyclone (2002), and the Bihar floods in July 2004 (Roy, 2018). However, since 2004, India has declined all humanitarian aid until the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2021. For example, it rejected aid following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, the 2013 Uttarakhand floods, the 2014 Kashmir floods, and the 2018 Kerala floods.

India presents a unique case owing to its variations in responses to offers of humanitarian aid, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its shift from a longstanding policy of aid refusal to acceptance during a crisis provides a valuable opportunity to observe how a country navigates the costs of both domestic and international audiences. This dual response not only reveals the diversity of strategies that states may adopt but also provides empirical grounding for examining the applicability of audience cost theory in different crises. The marked temporal variation in India's aid responses is ideal for analyzing how audience costs influence aid decisions. Furthermore, India's case sheds light on how emerging powers manage external support in a complex political landscape, contributing to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind aid refusal.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. The next section presents the literature regarding state aid refusal and discusses variations in the aid responses of rising states. The subsequent section describes audience cost theory regarding aid refusal and the independent variables. The ensuing section presents the research methodology and its application in a case study tracing India's aid refusal behavior. The final section presents the conclusion and the importance of investigating refusal in international relations.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 State Behavior Analysis: Aid Responses**

Although the literature on state aid refusal is limited, studies have provided several explanations for when and why a state decides to refuse donor aid. The first explanation is based on rationalism and highlights the influence of material factors, such as wealth and capabilities, on state behavior. Wealthier, highly capable states tend to have higher confidence in their ability to handle a disaster and are more likely to refuse aid. However, even in capable states, emergency response capabilities can be strained in response to sudden major disasters. Even the United States has had difficulty responding to many major disasters. Thus, material factors are insufficient to fully explain aid refusal.

In contrast to rationalism, behaviorism emphasizes the influence of incentives on behavior. The second explanation pertains to international reputation. One major incentive is improving international reputation. Scholars have argued that aid refusal can help states gain reputation (Carnegie & Dolan, 2020) and that, conversely, acceptance can damage both state self-image and reputation (Nadler, 2014) because becoming a recipient implies "inferiority and impotence" (Kuusik, 2006). Consequently, a state that seeks to enhance its reputation is more likely to refuse aid.

The third explanation for a state's response to humanitarian aid during a crisis pertains to domestic politics. One scholar suggested that "both the provision and refusal of humanitarian aid are influenced by political considerations" (Dany, 2020). However, the aspects of domestic politics that most influence a state's decision-making remain unclear and should be further investigated. One element that may affect acceptance is regime type; some scholars have argued that autocracies and states undergoing democratic transitions are more likely to reject aid than democracies (Nelson, 2010).

Finally, some argue that the "nature of aid" can result in state refusal due to political elements (Selth, 2008). Donors provide foreign aid as an instrument to gain power and influence (Morgenthau, 1962), and potential recipients may fear that humanitarian aid is tied to political conditions (Nelson, 2010). However, state conceptions of the political aspects of aid vary; more powerful states are less likely to strongly weigh the political nature of aid when contemplating aid acceptance. Thus, political factors can explain the refusal of only small or weak states but not of rising powers.

The literature has yet to explain when and why states decide to refuse instead of accept. Although theories have been proposed that consider state incentives to maintain their national security and reputation and how humanitarian aid might contribute to these goals, a clear explanation of the factors affecting why a state accepts aid in some circumstances but not in

others is lacking. Another intriguing element is the differential response of the international community to aid different countries, even in the same crisis. These factors were explored empirically in the case study of India's refusal of humanitarian aid during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2.2 Audience Cost Theory: Explaining State Aid Refusal in Crises**

Audience cost theory includes some elements of previous theories but further posits that state behavior is caused by different levels of audience cost, considering international politics and domestic politics. Static theories that analyze the foreign policy of rising states based on characteristics such as capability, reputation, and status are insufficient for explaining aid behavior; a dynamic theory that can reveal transformations of foreign policy is necessary. Status-seeking theory can only explain general foreign policy; it cannot explain changes in foreign policy during a crisis. Audience cost theory is a dynamic theory that can explain not only behavior in global crises but also other foreign policy decisions (Kertzer & Brutger, 2016). By describing interactions between leaders and their audiences, audience cost theory can reveal how a state's aid response during the international crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic is shaped.

Fearon (1994) introduced a model highlighting that international crises play out as public events, observed by both domestic and international audiences. With the development of modern communications and media and the acceleration of globalization, international events and crises have become increasingly common (Cottle, 2009). Therefore, every international crisis now has an associated audience. International political crises increasingly have stronger domestic political effects due to the internationalization of domestic affairs (Cleveland, 1979). A state's response to humanitarian aid for the COVID-19 pandemic would be carefully observed by various audiences. Thus, audience cost theory is likely applicable to explaining state responses to humanitarian aid in an international crisis.

Audience costs comprise the costs that an aid recipient perceives before an aid response and the costs the recipient realizes following a decision. Factors that contribute to audience costs include whether domestic political groups will punish leaders who retreat in diplomacy, whether domestic audiences oppose a diplomatic stand, and whether the outside world can observe whether domestic audiences punish leaders (Weeks, 2012). A state choosing aid refusal does so in consideration of both domestic and international audience costs. If a leader refuses aid and fails to overcome a disaster, the leader may face consequences from the domestic political audience, including criticism, condemnation, or even dismissal; these comprise the domestic audience cost. Leaders are often reluctant to reverse earlier diplomatic positions during an international crisis due to the fear of incurring these domestic political costs (Yasui & Nakai, 2016). Domestic audiences punish leaders who misrepresent national capabilities and fail to achieve disaster relief and mitigation, causing a loss of reputation and a reduction in national security. Leaders who change their positions or take new measures incur audience costs. In international crises, leaders should not deliberately resort to bluffing and deceit in diplomacy, because a leader with a reputation for dishonesty is likely to incur losses in future diplomacy. This decline in international reputation and national image is an example of international audience cost. Audience cost may help explain why many leaders prioritize safeguarding the national image and how concerns over reputation influence international relations (Tomz, 2007).

Audience costs from different sources have differing influences on decision-making; anticipated audience costs from audiences that are essential to a leader's legitimacy have an outsized effect. Typically, domestic audience costs are more influential than international audience costs because governments are more likely to lose power over domestic issues than foreign affairs (Fearon, 1994). Moreover, the costs imposed by international audiences tend to materialize more slowly (Partell & Palmer, 1999).

However, Sartori states that international audience costs are still critical to leaders (Sartori, 2005). A state may be willing to bluff during a particular crisis or make promises regarding domestic disaster relief that it is unwilling or unable to fulfill. In this scenario, international audience costs may result in promoting aid acceptance. For example, Myanmar's refusal of international aid during Cyclone Nargis in 2008 sparked condemnation from various states and international organizations, ultimately pressuring it to adopt a strategy of aid acceptance (Lee, 2008). Similarly, the Japanese government was criticized for its aid refusal in the Kobe earthquake of 1995 (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2021). In these scenarios, a state perceived as "dishonest" or lacking "determination"—the resolve and commitment to effectively manage crises and fulfill its obligations—must bear international audience costs. Such reputational damage can undermine a country's international standing and limit its future capacity to act effectively in the global arena (Sartori, 2000).

Audience costs arise from the actions of international organizations, foreign states, the domestic public of the recipients, and the international communities of donors and other global actors. The uniting principle is that these costs are imposed on the recipient because it refused aid. The domestic audience comprises the people, ruling party insiders, and nonparty groups; the international audiences comprise other countries (Fearon, 1994). Audience costs can include social actions, such as key speeches and demonstrations. Factors affecting total audience costs include the amount of public participation, the intensity of media and public opinion, heterogeneous forces within the ruling class, and the attitudes of international audiences. Calculating the expected audience cost accurately is difficult but unnecessary, because a macro ranking is sufficient to explain state tendencies to certain behaviors and choices.

### **3. Logic of Variation in Aid Acceptance by Rising States**

On the basis of audience cost theory, which posits that audience costs to drive a state's aid response, this study developed a theoretical framework to explain why and when rising states refuse humanitarian aid in a crisis. This framework contained two variables, namely the recipient's perceived international audience cost and domestic audience cost. Potential recipients assess these two variables to make decisions on the appropriate aid response. These variables were used to make predictions on relevant outcomes, as listed in Table 1.

Table 1.

*Measurements of refusal cost and the leader faced audience pressure*

Cost Source	Degree of Refusal Cost	Measurement	Outcome
International audience	Low	The majority support refusal	Refusal pressure is weak.
	High	The minority supports refusal, or the majority is indifferent	Refusal pressure is strong
Domestic audience	Low	The majority support the refusal	Motivation for refusal is weak
	High	The minority supports refusal, or the majority is indifferent	Motivation for refusal is strong

A state’s aid response strategy is typically logical and can be adjusted flexibly according to the circumstances. Although aid response policies may occasionally seem irrational, such policies often have more continuity between administrations than is generally believed. For example, the Modi’s government in India continued the policy of aid refusal under Manmohan Singh when Modi refused international aid for Kerala flood relief in 2018.

The refusal cost is defined in terms of the audience’s attitude because the refusal of aid itself does not generate the audience's cost. Instead, the effect of refusal on public interest and attitudes toward aid is linked to audience costs. However, the audience costs discussed in this article mainly depend on the public's attitude toward refusing aid. The support of the public for refusal is unrelated to state gains and the punitive consequences of refusal.

Refusal costs are associated with four distinct scenarios (Table 1), and each scenario is associated with specific decision-making standards and outcomes: (1) When potential donors have no objection to refusal, the international audience cost is low, placing minimal pressure on leaders to refuse aid. (2) Conversely, if only a minority supports refusal or the majority is indifferent, international audience costs rise, and refusing leaders face significant political risks. (3) Domestically, if the majority of political supporters favor refusal, domestic audience costs are low, and leaders have little motivation to refuse aid. (4) However, when only a minority supports refusal or the majority remains indifferent, domestic audience costs increase, pushing leaders to refuse aid to preserve political credibility. Under such circumstances, leaders are more strongly motivated to refuse aid.

Although accurately assessing domestic and international audience costs is difficult, costs to states can be sorted on a macro level. Identifying a specific value for the audience cost is neither necessary nor practical. Even if the majority of a domestic audience is indifferent, leaders may still feel strong motivations to refuse aid due to concerns about international perceptions and diplomatic relationships. Leaders may prioritize the reaction of the international audience, especially if the national reputation is at stake, which intensifies the motivation to refuse despite low domestic opposition.

Finally, although the recipient faces pressure from the international audience, domestic audience costs primarily drive the recipient’s decisions regarding aid responses. Leaders may consider two key factors when engaging with audiences: international and domestic audience costs.

However, not all audience costs influence aid responses, as this depends on the state’s “stateness.” According to Blanchard (2008), stateness includes three dimensions: autonomy, state capacity, and legitimacy. A state with high stateness is stable, even if some components are moderate. Conversely, insufficient stateness arises when one or more dimensions are low. The management of international and domestic audience costs varies based on the level of stateness. Figure 1 displays a flowchart of the logic of aid refusal for rising states.

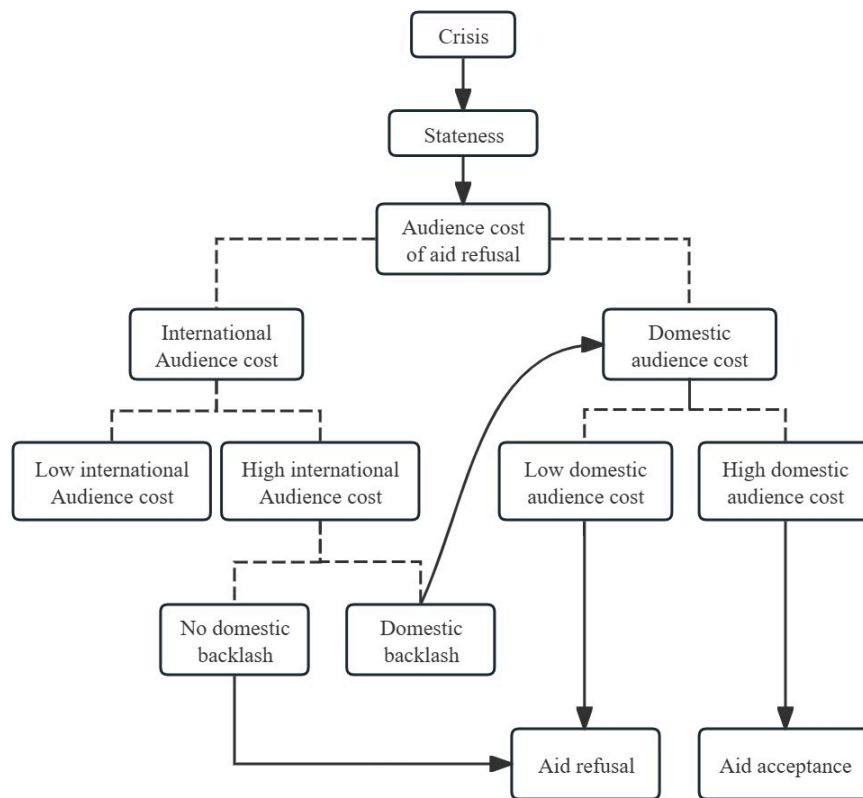


Figure 1. Roles of stateness and audience cost in aid refusal for rising states.

Audience costs affect a state’s response to aid for a crisis. A potential recipient’s choice of aid response strategy depends on (1) whether potential donors could provide aid when a crisis happens, (2) the perceived degree of the international and domestic audience costs of aid refusal, and (3) the effects of changes in stateness on the audience costs of aid refusal.

A political recipient must first consider whether potential donors exist. This varies depending on the type and severity of the crisis. Crises could include severe natural disasters or wars that a potential recipient could not handle themselves. If no donors are available, a recipient does not receive aid. However, this situation is rare; a crisis typically spurs donors to provide aid, and an affected state can appeal for humanitarian aid if donors are absent or insufficient.

Stateness likely plays an intermediary role to audience cost in affecting state policy. Not all international and domestic audience costs impact decision-making, and their relative importance may vary. States with higher stateness levels are less affected by domestic audience costs and are generally immune to international audience costs. However, leaders in states with lower stateness levels must give more weight to domestic audience costs; this may be further exacerbated if international audience costs are high because these leaders must obtain international support and distract the domestic audience to avoid a domestic backlash. This argument demonstrates that the audience cost is not static; it is affected by stateness.

#### **4. Methodology**

To demonstrate that audience cost theory best explains the choices of rising states regarding humanitarian aid, this study conducted an extensive evaluation of aid refusal cases in a rising state, India. India is an example that provides unique insight because its responses to humanitarian aid during the COVID-19 pandemic were varied. This presents a unique opportunity to analyze the temporal variation in aid refusal and acceptance. Data were collected from multiple sources, including government documents, political speeches, news reports, and other relevant literature. Government documents and policy reports provided primary data on aid refusal policies and decisions, and political speeches offered insights into the rhetorical and strategic justifications for aid refusal. Media coverage from reputable national and international news outlets was used to gather information on the public discourse and reactions surrounding aid refusal events.

The collected data were meticulously hand-coded to identify patterns and themes related to aid refusal. This coding process involved categorizing instances of aid refusal and acceptance by considering the context, justifications, and outcomes of these decisions. Key variables included the nature of the aid offered, the domestic and international political environment, and the public response. A temporal analysis was conducted to explore the changes in India's aid refusal over time; the analysis focused on the different waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. India's responses during the first and second waves were compared to test the hypothesis that audience costs play a significant role in aid refusal decisions. To uncover causal mechanisms, process tracing was employed to meticulously analyze the sequence of events leading to either the refusal or acceptance of aid, isolating the influence of audience costs on the decision-making process.

Audience cost theory, which constituted the basis of this study's theoretical framework, suggests that both international and domestic audience costs affect a state's decision to either refuse or accept humanitarian aid. To test this theory, this study examined potential reputational damage and diplomatic consequences (international audience costs) as well as potential political backlash and public dissatisfaction (domestic audience costs) in order to determine whether audience cost theory can sufficiently explain India's aid refusal behavior during the pandemic. To ensure validity and reliability, the various data sources were triangulated, and the coding process was independently verified by several researchers. This thorough methodological approach was implemented to offer a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing aid refusal, thereby contributing to the broader discussion on international aid, state behavior, and crisis management.

India, a large and populous country, faced a catastrophic wave of COVID-19 infections in early 2021, which pushed its healthcare system to the breaking point. This crisis presented a unique opportunity to observe how a major developing country with a complex socioeconomic fabric navigates the receipt of external support during a time of unprecedented need. The decision by India's government to initially reject or delay accepting international aid sparked global debate. That reaction challenged the conventional wisdom that nations in distress eagerly embrace foreign assistance. This study explored this anomaly by examining the psychological underpinnings of national pride and sovereignty concerns that often inform such decisions. Additionally, it examined the economic rationale behind prioritizing domestic production and self-reliance, even amid dire circumstances. Moreover, the Indian case highlights the complexities of humanitarian diplomacy in which geopolitical tensions and historical relationships can shape the nature and extent of aid offered. The dynamic between India and its global partners, particularly the West, provides a rich backdrop for analyzing how power dynamics and strategic interests can influence the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The findings of this case study are expected to provide valuable insights into the complex factors that shape a country's decision to accept or reject aid; this can thus help clarify the nuances of crisis response and international cooperation. Moreover, the findings regarding India's experience are expected to enhance the understanding of the challenges and opportunities involved in global humanitarian efforts.

## **5. Case Studies: India's Aid Response to COVID-19 Pandemic**

### **5.1 Background**

Since 2004, India has repeatedly faced severe natural disaster crises, and its aid response has often been "just say no" or an "indiscriminate refusal" strategy (Cohen, 2002). In the first wave of COVID-19 in India, India refused foreign aid. The Indian government also took action against foreign donors such as Compassion International, the Ford Foundation, World Movement for Democracy, Open Society Foundations, and the National Endowment for Democracy. These organizations were placed on a watch list or were required to gain permission from the Ministry of Home Affairs before sending funds to Indian associations (Singh, 2020). However, during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, India abandoned this restrictive stance, beginning to accept humanitarian aid. This was a notable departure from its policy following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, after which then-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared that India would handle the disaster with its own resources (Indian Express, 2018).

During the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, India accepted a large-scale global effort by numerous countries that mobilized to deliver emergency medical supplies. Russia was among the first to respond, with President Vladimir Putin promising emergency medical aid during a phone call with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on April 28 (The Moscow Times, 2021). Modi also expressed his deep gratitude for assistance and support from the United States (Economic Times, 2021), including the prompt provision of remdesivir and other drugs to treat COVID-19 (Rohatgi, 2021). The United States also sent rapid diagnostic kits, ventilators, and public health teams from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Additionally, they provided financial backing for expanding vaccination programs and oxygen generation supplies that were critically undersupplied to Indian hospitals (Finnegan & Kolinovsky, 2021).

By early May 2021, India had received approximately 9000 oxygen concentrators, more than 5000 oxygen cylinders, 18 oxygen generators, and 340,000 remdesivir vials (Parpiani, 2021). By mid-May, nearly 40 countries had offered various forms of assistance. These international donations were largely seen as a gesture of reciprocity, as India had earlier distributed 66.3 million vaccines abroad (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021).

## **5.2 Low Expected Audience Cost and India's Aid Refusal in the First Wave of COVID-19 Pandemic**

The causal mechanism through which expected audience cost influences aid response in India can be understood by tracing how democratic “strong leaders” responding to previous crises established a foundational model of leadership for handling future challenges.

In the first wave of COVID-19, India's aid response was dependent on the audience cost, but both the domestic and international audience costs of refusal were low. The international audience expected India's aid refusal because of the continuity of its aid response policy as well as its effective responses in previous crises. Other states were also preoccupied with handling their outbreaks and were not focused on the situation in India. Internationally, during this period, a peak in infections was reached early in Taiwan, followed by Japan, South Korea, Canada, and Italy. Europe, including Italy, later experienced a second wave of infections. At the UN General Assembly in September 2020, Prime Minister Modi affirmed India's commitment to making its vaccine production and delivery capacity available to humanity in the fight against the virus. A core principle of Indian foreign policy, Vasudeva Katumbakam, or “the world as one family” (Surie, 2021), underpinned the government's use of diplomatic opportunities to showcase leadership both within South Asia and globally (Taneja & Bali, 2021). In 2020, Bhutan was among the first to receive Indian medical supplies under the Coronavirus Emergency Fund (Aninews, 2020). Consequently, the international audience cost was low and had little influence on India's aid response during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Domestically, the effect of audience costs was not immediately apparent in India. Despite having a sixth of the world's population and a similar proportion of global cases, only 10% of the world's COVID-19 deaths occurred in India, and the case fatality rate was one of the lowest globally at less than 2% (Biswas, 2020). By early December 2020, India had one of the lowest rates of COVID-19 cases per million population (158), far below many countries in the Western Hemisphere (The Hindu, 2020). The Indian public had faith in their government, believing it would implement lockdown measures effectively, ensure that citizens had access to essentials, and make necessary arrangements during the lockdown (Barkur, Giridhar, & Kamath, 2020). Indian manufacturers also expressed confidence in their capacity to meet future vaccine needs (Kumar et al., 2021). However, as 2021 began, India's government dismantled temporary COVID-19 isolation centers and eased social distancing and lockdown measures; both the political leadership and the public prematurely declared victory over the pandemic.

### **5.3 High Audience Cost and Lowering Stateness: India's Aid Acceptance in the Second Wave of COVID-19**

During the second wave of COVID-19, Indian political leaders faced increasing domestic and international audience costs for aid refusal. This wave also resulted in a decrease in its stateness. Therefore, the Modi government took additional steps to proactively coordinate pandemic response efforts (Economic Times, 2021), seeking support from the global community to manage India's escalating COVID-19 Pandemic crisis (New York Times, 2021). In this period, India's leaders considered both domestic and international audience costs.

In particular, the domestic audience costs associated with aid refusal surged during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted India. This crisis exposed the administration's lack of preparedness and eroded Prime Minister Modi's support, resulting in his approval ratings falling below water for the first time in seven years (Miglani & Ghoshal, 2021). The urban middle class, a key opinion-shaping demographic, expressed dissatisfaction with Modi's pandemic response (Financial Times, 2021). Additionally, opposition parties criticized the government, and public discontent was reflected in social media trends such as "Modi Resigns" (Li, 2021).

Modi's approval ratings reached a new low according to two surveys as the country struggled to manage the devastating second wave of the coronavirus pandemic (Miglani & Ghoshal, 2021). A sharp decline occurred in April, with his net approval dropping by 22 points (Miglani & Ghoshal, 2021). Funding and relief measures for the poor and vulnerable in the US\$ 23 billion Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana relief package fell short as it largely reallocated existing budgets or allowed early withdrawals from social benefits instead of providing additional funding (Bharali, Kumar & Selvaraj, 2020). India's government was fiercely criticized by opposition politicians over the slow pace of the aid distribution and the lack of clarity on the destination of the relief (Financial Times, 2021). Many hard-hit states reported that they had not received any assistance, and some said that much-needed supplies were still sitting in warehouses. The insistence of the Modi government on the aid refusal policy could provoke even greater opposition from other parties and the public, threatening Modi's administration. These events all contributed to India's decreasing stateness.

In the evolving international context, the cost of refusing aid has also significantly increased. The Delta variant, first identified in India in October 2020, triggered a massive second wave of COVID-19 cases, and the highly contagious strain then spread worldwide (Ellyatt, 2021). On April 8, 2021, India's daily cases reached an all-time high of nearly 100,000, drawing attention from the international community. In May 2021, India reported the world's highest single-day records of new COVID-19 cases, surpassing 400,000, and deaths, reaching approximately 4,500 (Parpiani, 2021).

This devastating second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the longstanding gap between healthcare capacity and demand in India; experts had warned about this mismatch for years (Mukhopadhyay, 2021). The country faced severe shortages of oxygen, medical equipment, and therapeutic drugs amid the surge in cases (Sen, 2021). India's crisis management was widely criticized, with some arguing that the Modi government prioritized election rallies with large crowds and redevelopment projects over effectively addressing the pandemic and saving lives (Mukhopadhyay, 2021). Criticism of Modi's pandemic

management extended outside of India; Modi’s government was reported to have “squandered its early successes,” and the premier was said to be at risk of “presiding over a self-inflicted national catastrophe” (Financial Times, 2021). These criticisms intensified the international audience on Indian leaders to accept foreign aid.

The surge in infection cases during the second wave of COVID-19 was a challenge to the Indian government’s legitimacy and undermined its claims of its ability to combat the pandemic. Consequently, India’s stateness continuously decreased, forcing India’s leaders to consider the high costs of aid refusal from not only the domestic audience but also the international audience. Aligning with theoretical predictions, no evidence suggested that domestic audiences viewed the acceptance of foreign aid negatively, indicating that aid acceptance did not erode domestic political support.

Table 2.

*Audience cost of aid refusal and India’s policy in the two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic*

Periods	Audience cost of refusal	Stateness	Aid response
First wave	Low	High	Refusal
Second wave	High	Decreasing	Acceptance

Table 2 presents the shift in India’s audience cost of aid refusal and its aid response strategy in the two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes in these variables are consistent with the predictions of audience cost theory. During the first wave of the pandemic, India’s audience costs for refusal were low, and its stateness was high, leading to a strategy of refusing aid. However, during the second wave, as the number of infections and deaths surged dramatically, the audience costs of refusal increased, and India’s stateness decreased, resulting in a strategy of accepting aid.

India’s aid response strategy during the first wave of the pandemic reflects its initial confidence in managing the crisis. Government documents and media reports reveal that India believed it had sufficient resources and capacity to handle the pandemic independently, leading to the refusal of external humanitarian aid. However, during the second wave, the collapse of the healthcare system and increasing international audience costs elevated India’s refusal of audience costs and decreased its stateness, ultimately prompting it to accept external aid without maintaining a stance of self-reliance.

This shift not only validates audience cost theory but also highlights the flexibility and adaptability of national strategies in the face of severe crises. This analysis of India’s aid response strategies in different waves of the pandemic provides a deeper understanding of the influence of audience costs on national decision-making and how state capacity affects decisions to accept or refuse foreign aid.

Records from India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) further demonstrate the nation’s dual role as both a provider and recipient of international aid. Lok Sabha proceedings document India’s contributions to global development through financial support, including grants, loans,

and technical assistance (MEA, 2018). During the pandemic, Rajya Sabha records highlight the substantial aid India received, including vaccines and medical supplies, which supported its COVID-19 response (MEA, 2021a). Additionally, India's vaccine donations and medical aid to other countries reinforced its commitment to global health and its role as a responsible international actor (MEA, 2021b).

In the context of emergency aid, Rajya Sabha proceedings demonstrate that India efficiently managed and distributed the international aid that it received, ensuring timely delivery of essential resources, especially in COVID-19 hotspots (MEA, 2021c). Lok Sabha records emphasize the well-organized distribution of international aid during crises, reflecting India's capability to handle large-scale humanitarian logistics (MEA, 2021d). Furthermore, Rajya Sabha proceedings reveal that the state of Andhra Pradesh benefited from international aid during natural disasters and other emergencies, which not only addressed immediate needs but also supported long-term recovery efforts (MEA, 2021e). Collectively, these records illustrate India's dual role in the international aid landscape, emphasizing its contributions and the global support it garners, thereby reinforcing its position and responsibility in fostering international cooperation and solidarity.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study applied audience cost theory to analyze when and why rising states refuse aid during crises, focusing on India's response to two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal the nuanced dynamics in a state's aid response, highlighting how refusal strategies influence donor-recipient relationships, crisis management, and future international interactions. The aid response strategies that a potential recipient chooses to adopt can shape subsequent interactions between the donors, leading to an increase in trust and further cooperation or increases in global governance costs and discord in aid relations.

The findings indicate that stateness is a key factor influencing whether audience costs affect aid responses. Although decision-making by leadership is primarily affected by audience costs, higher stateness enables leaders to discount these costs. By contrast, states with lower stateness must provide greater consideration to the domestic costs of refusal. Similarly, they require international support and therefore must also consider international costs, but only in the absence of a domestic backlash. The results of this study suggest that India's leadership selects an aid response to gain support from both domestic and international audiences.

The findings further illustrate that aid refusal strategies are under-researched despite their prevalence. By examining how states evaluate audience costs when refusing or accepting aid, the study contributes to a broader understanding of global health crisis management and international aid dynamics. The patterns identified may extend beyond aid-related decisions, offering insights into treaty negotiations, organizational participation, and conflict dynamics.

Future research should explore the diverse forms and consequences of aid refusal, expanding to other policy areas such as international agreements and multilateral cooperation. Investigating the motivations behind different refusal strategies—including resistance, confrontation, and conflict—can provide deeper insights into state behavior and its implications for global governance. This study offers a foundation for understanding the

strategic decisions of rising states, their engagement with international audiences, and the complex interplay of domestic and global factors in shaping aid responses.

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