

Why Opposition United To Praise Sushma Swaraj

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When during Lok Sabha's question hour last week, I complimented External Affairs Minister (EAM) Sushma Swaraj for her handling of overseas Indians in distress, it was no surprise when many other members echoed the same sentiment. This rare moment of bonhomie cutting across party lines, when there has lately been considerable bitterness between the treasury and opposition benches, was welcome.

With the ever changing geo-political landscape, increasing globalisation coupled with securing the interests of the growing Indian diaspora, Sushma Swaraj has proved to a responsive leader at the helm of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Our diplomatic corps compared to many countries is small, yet our missions abroad have demonstrated tremendous capacity for the task at hand.

From my home state of Odisha, every year thousands of men are lured by agents, many unscrupulous, to work abroad on the promise of a better life and pay. In less than two months of this year, I have written about a dozen letters to our Ambassadors and High Commissioners across the world, seeking their intervention to help Indian citizens in distress. The prompt acknowledgment, correspondence and intervention by the missions demonstrate a dramatic new culture of responsiveness at the External Affairs Ministry.

In one particular example, an individual from my constituency was detained in a country for allegedly falsifying passport details. His original passport was seized by his employer, and in order to escape the harassment he was facing, he was enticed by a local agent to create a fake passport with a different name to leave the country. This is a very common predicament faced by Indian blue-collar workers abroad: to continue to face harassment or resort to risky choices. In this case, before he could exit, he was detained by immigration authorities.

As in most cases, the family back home are unaware of their son's/husband's place of work or other employment details. With only the name of the individual and the likely place of detention, the Indian mission was able to locate the individual after many weeks of coordination. Subsequently they secured his release as per the legal requirements and sent the individual back to India from Malaysia.

With a combination of strong coordination and timely action, the particular Indian mission demonstrated a firm grasp of ground realities and their efforts to navigate them. And this is only one example experienced by me. Indeed other parliamentarians have too praised Mrs Swaraj for her Ministry's efforts along similar lines.

The use of social media has also been leveraged to provide assistance to our citizens abroad. Whether it is to help facilitate visa for a five-year old Pakistani girl in need of a liver transplant, or those in distress on account of loss of passport, there are many examples of the new, improved Foreign Ministry.

Despite the occasional setbacks such as the Nepal crisis, the MEA has performed well in difficult circumstances such as multiple mass evacuation efforts from conflict zones. With instances of senior functionaries being present on the ground to coordinate efforts, as in the Yemen crisis, our diplomats have assumed a new confidence to take on the challenges that Indian citizens may face around the world.

This cannot have been easy, particularly at a time when a larger-than-life PM has been himself spearheading a renewed foreign policy agenda in mission mode. Despite the increased load that this must surely have put on the ministry, it is creditable that they have proved up to it. And particularly so for an External Affairs Minister who had not cut her political teeth on foreign policy.

There is a tendency to equate diplomacy to grand gestures and major announcements. While this may be true to a significant extent, it is the *routine* affairs between nations that make the wheels of diplomacy churn. That indeed seems to be working for the average Indian citizen abroad