



Why regulation is needed to monitor foreign funding in NGOs

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According to data submitted by the Central Bureau of Investigation(CBI) to India's Supreme Court in 2015, the country has at least 31 lakh registered NGOs.

The number is more than double the number of schools in the country and 250 times the number of government hospitals and it means India has one NGO for every 400 people as against one policeman for more than 700 people.

Less than 10 per cent of NGOs have complied with the rules and more than 90 per cent did not submit their balance sheets. They are supposed to submit statements with the registrar of societies but they did not.

There is an urgent need for regulation especially for those which get funds from outside India. According to a report, India has more than 21,000 foreign-funded NGOs. An amendment to India's Foreign Contribution Regulation Act(FCRA) is awaiting presidential nod.

For decades, governments have been trying to knit together balanced rules to check the misuse of foreign funding because there is no such thing as a free lunch. While the role of civil society is crucial to the functioning of a democracy, foreign funding, if unchecked, can hamper the country's sovereignty.

This is where a balanced rule comes in and in its absence, India has had to resort to ad hoc crackdowns. NGOs have always played a big role in India be it in development or disaster relief but many of them have misused their influence to sell foreign narratives, push vested interests and promote religious conversion.

Recently, India suspended FCRA clearance for four Christian NGOs. Since 2014, India has cancelled the FCRA licence of 14,800 NGOs. In 2015 alone, 10,000 licences were cancelled among them were Ford Foundation, Greenpeace and Human Rights Advocacy group - lawyers collective.

In 2017, Michael Bloomberg's NGO Bloomberg Philanthropies was under the government's scanner. The NGO was accused of running a campaign to target Indian tobacco businesses. It was apparently lobbying against the sector.

Critics have often looked at these cases as India's crackdown on dissent. Earlier this year, India's apex court had said that the government of India cannot deprive NGOs of their right to receive foreign money but in the very same ruling, the Supreme Court of India said that organisations with "avowed political objectives in their memorandum of associations or bye-laws, cannot be permitted to access foreign funding."

Between 1993 and 2012, 39 countries enacted laws to restrict funding of foreign NGOs and these were developing countries. Hungary recently approved a law that made foreign-funded NGOs declare their foreign status on websites and promotional material.

Egypt, Russia, Israel and some other countries have similar laws and then we have China which has Gongos which are government organised NGOs which in other words are sitting oxymorons. India cannot have that it is a democracy. So it must regulate actively and balance transparency and internal security with dissent, foreign money cannot be allowed to influence policy and political discourse in India.

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