

# India's war on NGOs

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**New steps to control non-governmental organisations and regulate social work education will do India more harm than good, Abhiroop Chowdhury and Armin Rosencranz write.**

The Indian government is fighting a 'war of control' with the nation's non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector. There have been government crackdowns on several NGOs, some of which have been perceived as 'too critical' of central government policies.

This has been going on for some time. In January 2015, the Supreme Court of India struck down an order that restricted the flow of foreign funds to NGOs in India. Importantly, some organisations' funding had been cut short because of alleged involvement in 'anti-national activity', though this allegation was rejected by the court.

In the same year, the Indian government also tried to restrict the activities of other environmental NGOs of foreign origin, such as the Bank Information Centre, Sierra Club, 350.org, and Avaaz, with similar pretences.

So where has this hostility come from? The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) was initially formulated in 1976, and its purpose was to control the sector's influence in politics by regulating the influx of foreign funds to NGOs.

In 2004, a centre-left government came to power in India, which enacted progressive legislation such as the Right to Information Act, the Forest Rights Act, the Right to Education Act, and the Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

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NGOs apparently played a strong role in swaying public opinion in favour of these policies, and the FCRA was strengthened again in 2011 as some grew wary of their influence.



NGOs have a long history of influence in India. Researchers have indicated that the India-Pakistan war of 1975-77 was the point in India's history that most strengthened the sector. The chaotic political environment lent itself to NGOs who could give a voice to the oppressed, and it facilitated the growing influence of NGOs in the political arena.

Though NGOs have done vital work in the country, the politicisation of some NGOs has led the government to favour these crackdowns. This recently culminated in yet another amendment of the FCRA and a proposed National Council of Social Work (Education and Practice) Bill 2020.

There are four fundamental changes in the FCRA amendment. First, it introduces restrictions on the transfer of foreign contribution money to other organisations, seriously restricting collaboration between organisations.

Second, it restricts administrative expenses to 20 per cent of an NGO's budget, potentially affecting the salary of their employees.

Third, it mandates that every organisation must have its FCRA account in only one State Bank of India branch at Delhi, a regressive bureaucratic step in an era of online connectivity and digital monetary transactions.

Finally, it increased the power of government officers to investigate breaches.

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The other step taken by the government to control the sector is the recently proposed National Council of Social Work (Education and Practice) Bill, which regulates social work education. Through this bill, the government envisions a National Council of Social Work with a chairperson, a vice-chairperson, and 20 honorary members.



This council is supposed to promote ethical behaviour amongst social work professionals, but will amount to making it much more difficult to get a job in the NGO sector without a degree.

The timing of this is surprising.

With the nation already battling the COVID-19 pandemic and record-high unemployment, NGOs can play a significant role in reaching out to millions of suffering people and in publicising and promoting government action in the crisis.

With the pandemic and the economic slowdown limiting employment opportunities, the voluntary sector is still employing people through projects. The nation's unemployment rate was 27 per cent amidst the lockdown in May 2020. By contrast, the unemployment rate was only seven per cent during pre-pandemic times.

These developments in controlling the NGO sector and regulating social work education are counterproductive. They will scare away genuine professionals interested in engaging with India's problems for very little gain.

A reduction in administrative funds through recent FCRA amendments will limit the salaries of social work professionals, creating an incentive to stop doing this crucial work, and the National Council of Social Work (education and practice) Bill 2020 will effectively exclude many of those people engaged in the sector without a social work degree.

The International Monetary Fund predicts a 10 per cent contraction in the size of the Indian economy this fiscal year. India's per capita GDP is predicted to fall below Bangladesh in 2020-2021, which shows the damage done by the pandemic on the national

economy.

These are troubled times, and in an historic moment like this, the government must work cooperatively with the NGO sector to rebuild the nation, not target it with ever-increasing regulation.

