

Non-governmental organisations v Government of India: dissent and development in tension

Mujahid Mohammad discusses how India's government has prioritised economic development over free speech.



“Here is your country. Cherish these natural wonders, cherish the natural resources, cherish the history and romance as a sacred heritage, for your children and your children's children. Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin your country of its beauty, its riches or its romance.” This injunction from President Theodore Roosevelt continues to ring true, but in India this sentiment has come into conflict with the government's development goals and in response, led to the suppression of the free speech of environmental activists.

As the world's population edges towards 9 billion, the strain on the planet's depleting resources is steadily increasing. Over the past 30 years it has become clear that certain steps taken by governments to benefit contemporary societies have had negative effects on human health and the environment. Despite benefits to existing populations, no one has the right to exploit the reservoir of non-renewable resources to the extent that they are unavailable for the generations to come. There is a balance between development and conservation and in India the balance is threatened by crackdowns on environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

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In India in 2014, a new government of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi swept to power on the plank of economic development, which the previous government seemed to lack. With the backing of a historic mandate, many projects that had previously been stalled due to environmental concerns were given clearances, much to the chagrin of environmentalists. One such project was the allotment of the mining of Mahan Coal Block to Hindalco and Essar Energy (the allocation was later cancelled by the Supreme Court in September 2014). It was feared that this project would jeopardise the livelihoods of nearly 50,000 tribal people who depended on these forests for food, fodder and natural shelter. In an attempt to stop the project at its initial stage, a Greenpeace activist from the Indian chapter, Priya Pillai, was due to detail the negative impact in front of British Members of Parliament. Surprisingly, for a democratic country like India, Pillai was taken off from her flight to London, preventing her from delivering her address. The details of this unexpected incident became clearer when the Intelligence Bureau (IB) of India subsequently announced that Pillai was on the Look-Out-Circular (which effectively barred her from travelling abroad) because of her alleged anti-national activities in mobilising people against the project. The government offered to withdraw the circular if she committed in writing that she would not address the UK parliamentary committee regarding the alleged damages – forcing her to sacrifice her freedom of speech to regain her freedom of movement.

Unfortunately, the above incident is not the only instance in which an environmental activist with valid travel documents was stopped from travelling or was deported. In June 2015 Aaron Gray-Block, a Greenpeace International employee, landed in Bengaluru with valid business visa and passport. However, his passport was confiscated on landing and he was put on a flight to Kuala Lumpur with no reason given. Later on, it was revealed by the authorities that Block was put on blacklist for his “unfavourable” activities, again punishing him for his activism.

Greenpeace India is not the only international non-governmental organisation whose activists have been subjected to travel restrictions when writing on controversial issues. In November 2014, Christine Mehta, a US national of Indian origin working with Amnesty International India, was deported from India due to her now published unsparing report on the abuses committed by the army in Jammu and Kashmir under the draconian Armed Forces Special Power Act. Her research had caused unease in the government and she was strongly advised to drop it. However, she continued and was thus deported from India with her Person of Indian Origin card (which allowed her to work in India visa-free) cancelled.

These are only a few of the many actions taken by the government to clamp down on free speech and limit the activities of various NGOs that are alleged to hinder India's development. The ruling alliance has argued that international NGOs like Greenpeace improperly impose the agenda of developed nations of stalling development projects on emerging economies like India. The veracity of these allegations is the subject of another debate; however, that should not and does not give the government the right to muzzle dissent and stifle their freedom of expression.

The ordeal faced by such non-conformist organisations is far from over. Perhaps the most

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significant episode in the government's confrontation with Greenpeace has been the freezing of the bank accounts of Greenpeace India and restricting the organisation from receiving foreign funds, due to alleged tax irregularities. In June 2014, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) directed the Reserve Bank of India to wait for prior permission from the Ministry before releasing any funds received from Greenpeace International and Climate Works to Greenpeace India. However, this was struck down by the Delhi High Court, which observed that there had been no evidence against the NGO that would justify preventing it from accessing these funds, and that a difference of opinion from the government did not make the actions of an NGO against the national interest. However, in April 2015, the MHA blocked the domestic bank accounts of Greenpeace, stating alleged tax irregularities, which were vehemently denied by the organisation. In May 2015 the court allowed Greenpeace access to two of its blocked accounts in order to sustain its operations until the matter was decided in court.

It is very clear from the imperious actions of the government that it has been trying to use strong-arm tactics to make these NGOs toe the line. By instilling fear of closure, the government is trying to dilute the activism of these NGOs and ultimately quell their dissent. In April 2015, the licenses of nearly 9,000 NGOs were cancelled citing foreign funding violations and many more were barred from receiving foreign funds, including influential groups like the Ford Foundation.

India has always been a land where different opinions not only survived but flourished. It is the world's largest democracy with a very large intellectual and diverse debating population. These qualities make it capable of discussing problems and finding the solutions, given the space in which to do so. However, in light of such undemocratic, authoritarian actions putting pressure on dissent and free speech, it will be very difficult for India to retain its nature and its soul.

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