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Amnesty from answerability

These are unprecedented times where govts, communities and activists are all raising concerns over unregulated foreign interference. NGOs have no option but to offer the transparency they demand

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Pride Project, Views are personal

IN NOVEMBER 2016, 27 environmental NGO's in Russia were listed as 'foreign agents.' In 2015, China enacted a new law mandating registration and additional regulation for foreign-funded NGOs, citing interference in national security matters. Uganda has a government appointed board to provide oversight to NGOs and CSOs, including the right to disband them. In Cambodia, NGOs can be dissolved if they "jeopardize peace, stability and public order or harm the national security, national unity, culture and traditions of Cambodian society". Sixteen nations in Africa have enacted preventive legislation to prevent foreign funded NGOs from interfering with their sovereign rights.

Thus far, "Ninety-six countries have taken steps to inhibit NGOs". NGOs claim this is backlash against their ability to catalyse democratic processes and offer a voice to the subaltern and disenfranchised.

Be that as it may, we see a global stretch emerge. On the one hand, there is an emergence of "Sovereignty over Internationalism," with nations asserting themselves on international platforms and with multilateral agencies. On the other, as foreign affairs expert Jessica Mathews elaborates, there is a "power shift", where political power is shifting from elected policy-makers to unelected NGO's

A research report from the University of Iowa shows that India had a disproportionately high number of foreign-funded NGOs. Other outliers were Egypt and Iraq, unsurprisingly, around the time they saw domestic anarchy and upheaval. This report also elaborates on the massive lobbying and political-interference that these NGOs engage in.

Another study from NTU Singapore studied " Foreign interference, foreign influence, soft power, and hostile information campaigns." The study offers examples of "tactics,, including covert funding of politicians, parties, officials, influential persons, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media; cyber-attacks, and hostile information campaigns." It concludes that such interference includes....." deceptive and illegitimate interference" and recommends that "it is necessary for states to clearly define the redlines which foreign entities must not cross in another state's domestic politics."

Closer to home, a leaked Intelligence Bureau report elaborated how FCRA funds were being diverted towards scuttling developmental projects in the power, mining, agricultural and industrial sectors. The report lays out the *modus operandi*, including disguised money flows, staged protests, and PRhitjobs against specific projects.

Poverty-porn is lucrative business. Pictures of hungry African children and distraught rural women are used to raise funds; which are then used for business class travel, five-star dinners and jamborees for NGO staff. As per a recent report, may NGOs pass on "less than 4 percent of donations

raised to direct cash aid". Services like Charity Watch and Charity Navigator insist on transparency that most NGOs refused to provide.

You would think your donations to Amnesty International are being applied to save democracy and human rights. Instead, they were used to pay former executives Irene Khan and Kate Gilmore, \$ 533,000 and \$ 325,244 respectively (just over Rs. 8 crores) in severance.

In a twist of irony, when Gaetan Mootoo committed suicide citing questionable behavior from the organization's leaders. Amnesty reportedly paid \$ 800,000 (Rs. 7.5 crores) to his family in return for their silence.

That Amnesty tried to hush this up while demanding transparency from others, is being touted as an example of hypocrisy by experts and activists.

Normative claims (how things ought to be) are usually easier to "sell" than descriptive claims (how things are). Psychologists opine that normative claims are tempting. Almost a part of the human condition that needs and optimism-bias as a survival mechanism. Think of an abusive spouse that claims they are trying hard to change, that things will be better in the future while repeating the same passive-aggressive behavior that created the problem in the first place S/he is a victim to the 'normative' descriptive fallacy.

NGOs have been under severe scrutiny for peddling normative claims to well-meaning donors, and passive aggressive "resistance" to hopeful citizens.

Let's take the example of the agricultural sector.

Switzerland based agrochemicals giant Syngenta, which boasts of over \$23 billion in revenues, runs a foundation in India. Their website claims it "works with these resource poor farmers to help enhance their yields, thus improving their livelihoods." Their interventions include "substantial contributions to policy" and resulted in an optimistic publication titled *India 2040-Transforming Indian Agriculture*.

On the other hand, Bharatiya Krishak Samaj president, Krishan Bir Singh Chaudhary states, "Emamectin Benzoate used to be imported and sold at Rs.10,000 per kg by Syngenta, but was later manufactured by domestic companies and sold at Rs. 300 /kg. This would put immense pressure on farmers.

Indigenous farmer's groups point to seed makers such as Monsanto, Bayer, Syngenta, etc. for their role in agrarian distress, alleging that "Monsanto over a decade now has been manipulating India's laws by putting influential people on its payroll paying them with foreign trips etc."

These are unprecedented times where governments, indigenous communities and domestic activists; are all raising concerns over unregulated foreign interference. There is quite literally, only one way out. NGOs have no option but to offer the transparency and answerability that they deamd.