

NGOs want clearance to Bt. cotton withdrawn

40-17
By Gargi Parsai 7/11

NEW DELHI, NOV. 6. Even as the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) is meeting here tomorrow to consider the request of a private seed company (Pro-Agro, an arm of Aventis MNC) to commercialise its genetically modified (GM) mustard, NGOs today called for withdrawal of the conditional clearance given by the committee to genetically-engineered Bt. cotton "which had failed". They decried the secrecy in approvals to GM seeds without complete trials on biosafety and the effect on non-GM crop.

(Speaking to *The Hindu*, a representative of Pro-Agro, the GM mustard seed company, confirmed that they had sought approval of the GEAC for the commercial release of two varieties of GM Mustard-MT 95003 and MT 95005 — which was coming up for a decision tomorrow.)

Meanwhile, Vandana Shiva, environmental activist and Director of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, said at a press conference here today that their teams which had visited some States where Bt cotton was sown had found that the claims made by Monsanto-Mahyco seed company that Bt. being an effective pest-resistant crop were false.

"We demand immediate withdrawal of the conditional clearance for commercial planting given by GEAC and for Monsanto-Mahyco to pay compensation to farmers whose crop has been damaged by pests and diseases," she said.

She said that commercial clearance was given to Bt. cotton on the grounds that it had been fully tested in Indian conditions, that it did not require pesticide sprays and it gave higher yields and the farmers would have higher in-

comes. "All claims have been found to be false by the total failure of the crop in States where it was cleared for planting including Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra."

The Agriculture Ministry should ban the commercial sales of Bt. cotton seeds since it had brought unknown risks to bio-diversity and higher costs to farmers with no benefits, she said, adding that a high-level commission of inquiry be set up with the participation of independent experts to assess the damage to farmers from failed Bt. cotton.

Divya Raghunandan from Greenpeace, an NGO working for environment safety, said tomorrow's GEAC meeting was important and that it should not be used to give commercial clearance to transgenic mustard.

Mustard was a high-risk crop — being a food crop, that it was completely "unethical" for GEAC to even consider releasing a GM version. "GM mustard is transformed with gene material drawn from a bacterial gene that detoxifies the broad spectrum herbicide glufosinate so that the plant is not affected by the herbicide. The transformation of several genes from different bacteria makes protein expressions and consumption of this modified food crop a huge potential risk," she said.

"The GM mustard has been made resistant to a herbicide called glufosinate. Both the GM mustard and the herbicide are the products of a multinational, Pro-Agro, which is killing two birds with one stone," Devinder Sharma of the Forum for Biotechnology and Food Security said. Clearance to GM mustard would promote only the industry's interests as it would necessitate the use of that specific herbicide — "if you don't use this herbicide, you won't be able to control the weeds."

NOV 2002

THE HINDU

JOINING UPOV WILL TAKE AWAY INDIAN FARMERS' RIGHTS OVER SEEDS

NGOs oppose plant patents club

Sheila Mathrani
GENEVA 19 OCTOBER

THE right hand doesn't seem to know what the left hand is doing. Even as the Indian government is fighting tooth and nail to protect the interests of its farmers at the agricultural negotiations under the World Trade Organisation (WTO), it is about to cede hard won ground in the World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo) by planning to join the Union for Protection of New Plant Varieties (Upov).

Upov will take up India's application for membership of the organisation at its meeting which starts on Monday, October 21.

International NGOs ActionAid, Consumers International and Gene Campaign have publicly called upon the government to resist Upov pressure to join as it will spell disaster for millions of Indian farmers as well as weaken the opposition to Upov of other developing countries.

Addressing a media conference here, representatives of these NGOs explained that India, on becoming a member of Upov, will have to abandon its current national plant breeders and IPR legislations which recognise farmers rights and instead, will have to impose a "one size fits all" international legisla-

tion that will be detrimental to its interests.

According to them, India's membership of Upov will have a negative impact on nearly 70% of its people who depend on agriculture for a living. As of now, India is the only country in the world that places farmers' rights on an equal footing with that of plant breeders. Joining Upov will mean signing away this important right of the domestic agricultural community, they pointed out.

Dr. Suman Sahai of Gene Campaign said India spent 7-8 years drafting the comprehensive law on farmers rights. "Consequently, Indian laws are WTO-compliant in respect of plant breeders rights," she said.

However, since the legislation gives farmers' rights the same recognition as those of plant breeders, Indian farmers have rights over seeds, as well as protection from bad seeds provided by breeders, and also the right to compensation. Farmers are also protected from the so-called "terminator" seed technology.

This legislation takes advantage of the flexibility granted by the WTO's TRIPS agreement which, while making it mandatory for developing countries to enact IPR legislation protecting breeders of plant varieties, does not specifically require them to adopt Upov. The TRIPS agreement only lays down the

broad contours of overall policy but provides sufficient leeway to individual nations to promulgate laws best suited to them.

Gene Campaign has filed a petition in an Indian court challenging the government's decision to seek membership of Upov. "This is to ensure that farmers are not required to forfeit any rights that have already been granted to them, said Ms Sahai, adding that any decision to join Upov prior to a decision by the court could be contempt of court.

The government argues that membership of Upov will protect plant breeders' rights for varieties developed in the country. The NGOs counter this by pointing out that Indian plant breeders (mainly government agencies) have developed only some sugar cane, spices and wheat varieties. However, the gains from winning protection for these varieties will be far outweighed by the loss of rights that the Indian farmer will suffer on a wide range of other crops and cereals.

"This will leave farmers at the mercy of MNCs such as Monsanto and Cargill," Ms Sahai pointed out. "Six MNCs control approximately 70% of the patents on staple food crops. Thus, if seeds and agricultural inputs fall into the hands of private corporations, the incentive for domestic agricultural research will diminish," she added.

NGOs oppose eviction of Adivasis from forest land

11-11
18/10

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Pune: Nearly 40 social action groups from across the country, including the city-based National Centre for Advocacy Studies (NCAS), have demanded the immediate repeal of a ministry of environment and forests (MoEF) order which seeks the eviction of Adivasis (tribals) from forest land.

The order, which asks states and Union territories to summarily evict all illegal encroachment by September 30, also directed them to prepare a comprehensive list of encroachments with an update on the current status of eviction process.

The groups, which met at a national consultative meet in Nagpur recently, also decided to send a protest resolution from gram sabhas in the nine affected states—Maharashtra, Orissa, West Bengal, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Kerala—to President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, besides observing a protest week across the country.

Interestingly, the Maharashtra government issued an order on September 27, stating that the eviction cases need to be re-examined.

According to A.K. Nikar, conservator of forests (Pune circle), people living on forest land have been classified as Adivasis, Schedules Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Nomadic and denotified tribes in an attempt to identify those who constituted illegal encroachers.

"The government has asked the revenue and forest departments to look into each individual case and then regularise the encroachments as per the merits of the case," he said.

However, he added that those considered to be illegal residents would be evicted. According to NCAS executive director John Samuel, the MoEF's decision would cripple the lives of nine million Adivasis across the country.

"The government has already served notices to 3,000 households in Parbhani district, while in Ghoti and its neighbouring villages in Nagpur, the villagers have been asked to sign on blank pa-

pers," he claimed.

He said the idea behind involving gram sabhas in sending the protest resolution was because of the powers granted to them under the 73rd Amendment and the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996. "Gram sabhas are empowered to protect the interests of Adivasis and retain control of the natural areas in those areas," he said.

Pointing out that the MoEF and the central empowered committee constituted by the supreme court to study the encroachment of forest land did not consult the gram sabhas, Mr Samuel said, "This is a complete mockery of the powers vested in local self-government bodies in India."

Pointing out to a letter written by the National Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribe Commission to the Prime Minister, which has taken cognisance of it not being consulted by the ministry before issuing the order to evict Adivasis from tribal areas, Mr Samuel said that this was in violation of Article 338 (9) of the Constitution.

NGOs in government daze keep away from riot relief

SHEFALI NAUTYAL
AHMEDABAD, MAY 12

THEIR absence here is conspicuous. While non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international agencies had rushed to Gujarat after the January 2001 quake, they are shying away from extending a helping hand to this communally disturbed state. Even those who were active after the quake are doing precious little now.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which undertook construction of 1,400 dwelling units and schools after the quake, has stayed away since the local office has received clear-cut instructions directing them "not to get involved in any kind of relief or rehabilitation work during the on-going riots."

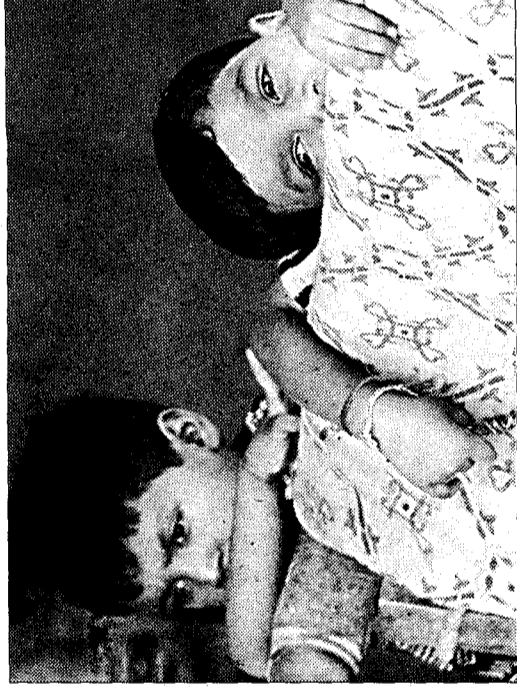
The state representative says: "I don't know why we received that order but we have to do what we have been asked to."

But others explain: "For any foreign agency to work in a state in

a conflict situation, the state government has to invite them. Unless this formality is done, the agency can't come," says Dr P. Ummikrishnan, co-ordinator, humanitarian aid, Oxfam India. "It can send material though, but even that has not happened this time. We don't know what humanitarian aid is needed as there has been no detailed assessment," he adds.

Citizen's Initiative — an umbrella of 34 local NGOs — has been working with the riot-affected but says the government is giving "mixed signals." "Initially, when we asked for police protection for relief work, we were refused. Later the government became slightly positive. Today again, while we discuss livelihood and rehabilitation with the government, there are mixed signals," says Bhavna Ramrakhiani, a member of the Initiative's co-ordination unit.

"When we met officials regarding the livelihood issue, they said think of what can be done at the camps and now there is talk of dismantling the camps," she says



Children in a curfew-bound locality of Ahmedabad on Sunday. Reuters

adding, "During the quake, the government and NGOs worked together, but this time we have been asked to do everything on our own — from the funding to collecting data to marketing products."

The organisations which took the initiative after the quake are

not doing as much now. UNICEF is playing the role of a facilitator, looking after sanitation, drinking water, immunisation and treatment of minor diseases.

The reason, says state representative Dr Y. Mathur, is that the state government already has its

resources. "The damage due to the quake was on a larger scale while the riots are confined to certain areas. The government has its resources and hence agencies like us are merely supplementing their work," he says.

Collector K. Srinivas says the NGOs have been invited by the government but said there could be certain reasons why many haven't come forward. "Not all organisations are trained to deal with a situation of animosity between two communities. Secondly, not many organisations are willing to fund such issues so there is a crunch," says Srinivas. "All efforts — from relief to rehabilitation — are by the government, the NGOs were simply asked to support," he says.

Director of Voluntary Agencies, M.N. Khaliani, denies allegations that the government does not want the agencies to work. "In fact, we were the ones who first approached the Disaster Mitigation Institute (DMI) on March 7. Since then, we've had a number of meetings with several agencies," he says.

300 leave camp for safety in Rajasthan

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
AHMEDABAD, MAY 12

OVER 300 minority community inmates from Bakarshaka Roza relief camp in riot-hit Gomitpur area of the city have left for Rajasthan in the last two days, camp coordinator Lalabhai said today. "About 330 people from Ghanchi community have left for home after a month long shelter in our relief camp," he said.

Lalabhai added the victims left for safer havens near Jaipur with shattered dreams and a measly compensation of Rs 1.250. "They were in utter despair. Until the other day they were hopeful but what they got was a paltry sum," he said. The camp inmates strength has dropped from 29,036 to 2,600 in the last few days. Lalabhai said 70 more families will be leaving in a day or two as they think their houses in Charola Kabarsihan and Mariam Biwi Ka Chawl areas would be better than the life here.

Sweating heat, absence of water and any good cover overhead have made life worse than one could imagine. These people, whose houses were ransacked but not burnt, are now willing to return provided there is security, he said. To a question, Lalabhai, who runs an electric repairing shop in Gomitpur, said: "as a relief worker I am also losing patience. How long can we continue to watch people suffer such negligence."

NGOs are looking for safe villages to resettle Gujarat riot victims

By Rajiv Shah
Times News Network

HIMMATNAGAR (Sabarkantha): As it is increasingly becoming clear that a large number of riot victims living in relief camps in Sabarkantha district are in no mood to return to their original dwellings, voluntary organisations are coming forward to work out plans to resettle them in Muslim majority villages.

Safe villages like Satnagar, Panpur, Ilol, Kanai and Parabda have been identified for resettlement and so have Muslim-dominated neighbourhoods in towns like Himmatnagar, Modasa and Idar. Meanwhile, those running the relief camps in the district have begun stating the obvious—that refugees can't live permanently in the camps.

The view is getting strong, they will have to either return or be resettled elsewhere. But with less than five per cent of the 12,000-odd displaced living in the camps having so far returned—mostly townfolk who had reached the camps out of fear—the problem of where to resettle the rest is now bothering camp managers. Rich Muslims have moved into rented houses away from their homes. As for the rest, with no official help forthcoming, alternate arrangements will have to be made.

A case in point is the 71 riot victims from Sardarpura village of Mehsana district, living at the Panpur-Patia relief camp near here for two months. They will never go back to reoccupy their homes where their forefathers lived. Terrified, seeing 42 people being burnt alive in front of their eyes, the victims will now be resettled in Satnagar village, about 10 km from here.

Efforts are being made to acquire and build 20 houses for the Sardarpura victims in Satnagar. The construction work will begin soon. Currently living in a tented accommodation in the camp, Khatijabibi, an elderly survivor said, with tears rolling from her eyes,

"What will we do by going back? We have lost everything." She is the lone guardian for Salma, 7, and Dilavar, 5, whose parents were charred to death during the March 1 carnage.

Says Ibrahim Sheikh, another survivor, "We worked as sharecroppers for the rich Patels on their farms. We were their trusted men, but the trust has been broken. We want an alternate site. We cannot risk going back to the same residential area. The government is refusing to give us an alternate housing site."

Sheikh and other survivors have no work and have to live on doles and free meals in the camp. "The government has put up no plans to engage them in any wage-earning work either," complains Anis Patel, a social worker from Vadodara. But government officials insist that Sardarpura villagers must return to their district. "They hope for a better deal from the Centre, that is why they continue to stay in the camp. Once they return, they fear they would not be able to bargain," alleges a district official.

The situation is the same with regard to the 150 families of Kidiad village of Malpur taluka, living in two relief camps in Panpur-Patia and Modasa town. With uncertainty over the fate of the 62 "missing" persons from Kidiad after they became victims of arson while travelling in a small truck on March 1 in the Panchmahals, and their houses destroyed, plans are on to resettle them in Panpur-Patia and Modasa. "They do not want to go back," says Usman Lala, who runs the Makhdum relief camp at Modasa.

Similarly, the terrified victims of two other villages, Dhansura and Fardi, do not wish to return to their homes. Their properties were set on fire, so they want to stay in Muslim-dominated areas in Modasa. In fact, arrangements are being made to build 140 houses in the neighbourhood of the majority area of Modasa town. At Panpur-Patia, too, land is being acquired to resettle about 300 families. The village panchayat has agreed to provide the land.

57-6
29/9

Target NGO ✓

Dhaka should rethink guidelines

The guidelines intended to curb non-governmental organisations in Bangladesh proposed by Khaleda Zia's government looks like the import of illiberal trends, coming as they do after attacks on intellectuals, minorities and the media since the BNP-led coalition came to power. The ruling alliance introduced a thoroughly illiberal bill, whereby prison sentences upto seven years as well as heavy fines could be imposed on journalists if lawmakers felt "insulted" by reports in the press; the Speaker could directly order arrests. The bill, fortunately, was shelved after protests. Another extraordinary episode was the imprisonment on grounds of "sedition" of prominent intellectual and human rights activist Shahriar Kabir, because he happened to collect evidence and write on persecution of minorities. The new round of NGO-baiting envisages government control and supervision extending to official interference in their administration, the choice of books limited to those followed by official education boards, and the proscription of what is deemed "political activity". NGOs have helped women with small loans, literacy and job skills, which has aroused the ire of fundamentalists because women are growing independent of their families. Those same fundamentalists now have a seat in Khaleda Zia's government, and are likely demanding their pound of flesh.

If women or secular groups were to protest against the depredations of fundamentalists, and NGOs were associated with them, they could, under the proposed rules, attract the charge of being politically involved and proscribed on those grounds. This is hardly the way to build a robust civil society, and it's no accident that illiberal parties in India — the BJP and the CPI-M come to mind — also seek to curb the activities of NGOs. Bangladesh's situation probably resembles what would happen if an analogous balance of political forces came about in India — let us say, if the BJP were to win a two-thirds majority in Parliament in alliance with the Shiv Sena. Nevertheless, Dhaka ought to keep in mind that it is dependent on foreign donors, and NGOs undertake a significant amount of poverty alleviation work in the country. If donors frown and poverty alleviation gains are reversed, the BNP will have to pay at the hustings sooner rather than later.

Bangladesh to control NGOs

Abdul Karim Siddiqui

Sept. 23. — The Bangladeshi government has formulated a new guideline to control activities of non-government organisations which have been playing a major role in alleviating poverty and enhancing literacy rate in the country.

Under the proposed guidelines, NGOs will not be allowed to participate in any political activity and have to follow books approved by the education boards for their non-formal education programmes.

The discretionary power the NGOs so long used to have to receive funds from the donors would be curtailed as they would be required to get clearance from the government to get funds from abroad.

The new guideline has been prepared by a Cabinet committee headed by the ruling BNP secretary general and local government minister, Mr. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan.

The BNP-led alliance government, which accused some of the NGOs of playing a partisan role in the last general election, em-

barked on regulating NGO activities after it came to power.

However, Mr Bhuiyan said the government had no intention to control the NGOs, and that it wanted to simplify the rules and regulations for smooth functioning of the NGOs. He said the committee's recommendations would be finalised at its next meeting.

Under the proposed rules the NGOs would not be allowed to get involved in political activities since "they are meant only for development work."

The committee has recommended involvement of the government administration at the lower tier of the NGOs to ensure transparency and accountability.

But some leading NGOs feel that this would certainly affect their activities at the village level.

The country's NGO sector had recently been divided into two groups as a result of which a counter-forum against the elected Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh has been formed.

Probe against five NGOs

SUBHENDU MAITI
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

KOLKATA, Aug 3. — The union ministry of tribal affairs and audit and accounts authorities at the Centre have begun an investigation against five state-based NGOs working for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

These are run by Mr Rajani Dolui, the Trinamul candidate from Kespur who lost the Assembly seat last year amid charges that the CPI-M was "terrorising voters".

The NGOs have been accused of misappropriating Rs 1.5 crore in Central funds meant for the welfare of SCs and STs.

Mr Upen Kisku, state backward classes welfare minister, told The Statesman: "These NGOs used to get Central funds showing fake bills. Another NGO based in Midnapore West district also used to draw huge money from the Centre in the same way."

These organisations might

be among the 12 NGOs pulled up by the National Commission for Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes for allegedly misappropriating crores of rupees, Mr Kisku said.

The commission asked the CBI to probe the misappropriation of Central fund for the welfare of SC/ST and backward classes.

Mr Vijay Kumar Chowdhury, member of the commission, earlier said an NGO run by a political leader in the state was involved in misappropriating funds.

The minister said, "We are yet to have the list of the 12 NGOs in the state. We have asked the commission to send their names."

Mr Dolui runs several NGOs like West Bengal Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribes and Minority Welfare Association, Working Women's Hostel, Old Age Home, free computer training centre for SC/ST, residential school for SC/ST in West Bengal, Tripura and Orissa.

It is learnt that Mr Dolui met Mr Chowdhury in Delhi yesterday to discuss the development.

An employee of the one these NGOs in Midnapore said both the tribal affairs and social justice and empowerment ministries usually gave fund to their organisations.

Mr Vivek Sahay, SP, CBI, when asked told this correspondent, "We haven't yet been asked by the National Commission for Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes to probe the matter. The CBI office in Delhi may be probing the charge."

Mr Dolui said: "The ministry and CBI conducted investigations into some of my NGOs in the city and Midnapore West district several months ago. But they didn't find any irregularity." He admitted the tribal affairs ministry had stopped funding his NGO based in Orissa. "A section of CPI-M leaders is carrying out a campaign against me to tarnish my image," he alleged.

110-11
29/12

Centre trying to choke voluntary sector: NGOs

By Vinay Kumar

NEW DELHI, FEB. 23. Representatives of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and voluntary bodies are up in arms over what they call is the "Centre's attempts to choke the voluntary sector" by further tightening the flow of foreign funds for development projects in the country.

In an era when the Government is pursuing the second generation of economic reforms and has enacted a mild law like the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), it is the voluntary sector which has not been given any facility in terms of foreign funding.

Acknowledged the world over as an accepted practice, the receipt of foreign funds for development projects by the NGOs pumps the much-needed resources into the sector, supporting governmental efforts and establishing institutions for constructive purposes.

After the NDA Government took over at the Centre in 1998, the voluntary sector faced allegations of misusing foreign funds for illegal, anti-national activities and religious conversions. What has irked the voluntary organisations is the Centre's reported move to replace the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) with a new Act called the Foreign Contribution (Management and Control) Bill, with more stringent provisions. The FCRA, which regulates the receipt and utilisation of foreign contribution to voluntary organisations, was enacted during the emergency to check foreign contribution being used to 'destabilise' the Government.

As the NDA Government considers the FCRA too soft, it is keeping the option open of enacting tougher measures relating to the acceptance and utilisation of foreign contributions by NGOs. Highly-placed Government sources say the Bill is yet to be brought before the Union Cabinet.

The proposed Bill plans to involve State Governments and District Collectors in registration of voluntary organisations. Senior Home Ministry officials say the move would end harassment by the Intelligence Bureau (IB) officials. They argue that a District Collector, as the local authority,

would be in a better position to register an NGO and monitor its activities.

Home Ministry officials point out that nearly 13,800 registered organisations submit their annual accounts to the Ministry but their total number could cross 20,000. Officials argue that rapid growth in the numbers of NGOs has made monitoring more difficult and the work has to be decentralised. The proposed Bill envisages penalties by the State Governments if money was not utilised for the stated objective, gives powers to the District Collectors to cancel the registration and make the registration valid for five years.

Though voluntary organisations have welcomed the provision of making District Collectors responsible, they feel it would be detrimental to the very essence of voluntarism and free spirit of working. The Centre would monitor the implementation of the law and also issue guidelines to the States on implementation. *Prima facie*, it appears to be an attempt to decentralise the mechanism but in real terms it would only tighten the controls over voluntary organisations.

Quoting official figures, the representatives of NGOs say that only 6.6 per cent of foreign funds were used for religious purposes and top recipients of foreign money were two well-known Hindu religious organisations — Maharshi Ved Vignyan Samithi and Sri Satya Sai Trust. The north-eastern States only received 2.09 per cent of the total foreign funding whereas the four southern States — Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala — receive 49.55 of the total foreign fundings. The total foreign funding of NGOs in 1999-2000 was Rs. 3,924.63 crores, a 15 per cent increase over the previous year.

All NGOs are bound to file annual returns to the Income Tax Department and misappropriation of funds, if any, can be checked by the authorities, the NGOs argue. The organisations can be monitored by the Finance Ministry which can also keep a tab on flow of contributions, they say. According to Anil Kumar Singh of the Voluntary Action Network of India (VANI), the FCRA should be repealed and efforts made to create a more conducive environment for the growth and sustenance of the voluntary organisations.