

'Bill to regulate foreign contribution discriminatory'

A group of eminent people from various walks of life Thursday urged Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to reconsider the introduction of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Bill 2006 in the coming session of parliament. They termed the draft legislation 'discriminatory'.

In an open letter to the prime minister, they claimed that the proposed bill will 'create a highly restrictive and discriminatory regulatory regime for civil society organisations receiving foreign contributions for their work'.

The proposed bill seeks to regulate the acceptance, utilisation and accounting of foreign contribution and acceptance of foreign hospitality by a person or an association and repeal the existing Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), 1976.

The bill is likely to be tabled in parliament during the second phase of the budget session beginning April 15. In December 2006, it was tabled in the Rajya Sabha and was referred to the parliamentary standing committee on home affairs for consideration.

Some of the prominent signatories were journalist and executive committee member of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) B.G. Verghese, farm scientist M.S. Swaminathan, former attorney general Soli Sorabjee, senior advocate Fali S. Nariman, political scientist Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Justice Ruma Pal, Admiral (ret'd) R.H. Tahiliani and environmentalist Sunita Narain.

'A significant number of voluntary organisations receive funds from well respected international donor organisations that fund similar initiatives in other countries,' they said in a press statement issued by the city-based CHRI on their behalf.

'The bill runs completely counter to the National Policy on the Voluntary Sector 2006, which pledges to encourage, enable and empower voluntary organisations, and lists enabling them to legitimately mobilise necessary financial resources from India and abroad as a specific objective.

'In the interests of safeguarding the fundamental freedoms of speech, expression and association, we urge the government to reconsider passing the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Bill, 2006. Enactment of such a Bill can undermine democratic space and the independence of the voluntary sector in India,' the press communique said.

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