

TRANSCRIPT

"FEARS AND SUSPICIONS AROUND FOREIGN PHILANTHROPY IN INDIA"

A conversation with Amitabh Behar and Prashant Sharma

Moderator: Bipasha Ray

* * *TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE: PRASHANT'S VOICE SOMETIMES DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND OVER PHONE.* * *

ANNOUNCER:

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BIPASHA RAY:

Welcome, everybody. I'm Bipasha with the Open Society Fellowship. And we're excited to have Amitabh Behar from India, who just flew in-- less than 48 hours ago.

AMITABH BEHAR:

Less than 24 hours ago. (LAUGH)

BIPASHA RAY:

Less than 24 hours ago. But he's doing very well. (LAUGH) And-- and on the phone is-- Prashant Sharma, one of our fellows, who is based in Geneva. Amitabh will-- will speak a little bit about the-- the crackdown on-- on foreign funding in India and the-- the space for NGOs and how that is-- how that is looking in real terms. This is something that he's-- it's-- it's a reality of life for-- for Amitabh.

And then Prashant will-- talk a little bit about the different aspects of-- where the suspicions arise from Iran foreign funding and-- (THROAT CLEAR) and-- what might

be some ways forward and apertures. So welcome, Amitabh. Amitabh is the-- executive direction of the National Foundation for India-- which is actually a grantee of OSF-- right now-- sort of bringing together work around public budgets and-- and monitoring public resources used for access to medicines.

His broader areas of interest include-- governance in civil society. Over the years, he's worked on issues promoting governance accountability and social action. He's one of the leading experts on people-centered advocacy and was the executive director for the National Center of Advocacy Studies.

He's the co-chair of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, the convener of National Social Watch Coalition, and earlier, was the convener of the Wada Na Todo Abhiyaan. He sits on a number of boards, including the Center for Budget and Governance Accountability-- Navsarjan, and is the president of Yuva.

Our discussion today-- joining us from Geneva, is our Open Society fellow, Prashant Sharma, (THROAT CLEAR) who is investigating public-private partnerships in the-- BRICS countries with a focus on India to gauge the extent to which they are accountable to citizens. He's also a visiting fellow at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. He has a Ph.D. from the London School of Economics and c-- has carried out extensive research on the Right to Information Act in India and beyond.

And his latest book is-- is titled *Democracy and Transparency in the Indian State: The Making of the Right to Information Act*, in which he unpacks the complex factors behind the enactment of the law to encompass a broader understanding of the contributions of the ruling elite in the private sector.

So with that, maybe I'll turn it over to Amitabh for-- for a little bit to discuss the situation in India today and what the realities (THROAT CLEAR) that you're facing on the ground. And-- and then, after about 10, 15 minutes, we'll-- we'll move to Prashant to discuss some of those issues. Thank you.

AMITABH BEHAR:

So thank you b-- Bipasha. And thanks for having me here. I just woke up with fairly tragic news. Some of you might know PRIA. PRIA is a large entity. And-- one of their directors, called Marta Farrell, has been killed in Kabul. She was also Rajesh Tandon's wife in the attack that happened. So that's, anyways-- tragic news for a lot of people who work in-- India in the NGO sector.

So on-- on this, you know, I-- I was certainly not prepared for such a large group. I thought it's gonna be a conversation with just-- with Bipasha, you. (LAUGH) So I'll still look at you and-- and do the conversation. So-- but this is--

BIPASHA RAY:

Surprise. (LAUGHTER)

AMITABH BEHAR:

But this is a lived reality for-- for us. So-- I-- I'll still try and gather my thoughts and-- and present what-- what I think is critical. First, let me just give you, very quickly, what the context is, just to give you some facts. In the last few months, we have now, from one to two to three, now we have 17 international donors-- which have been put either on the watch list, or they have been barred from funding in India.

So these are, just to give you the names, Greenpeace, which is an activist organization. So you all know Greenpeace. But it's not just the Greenpeace kind of organizations. You have recently now we have the Ford Foundation under the watch list. We have CORDAID. We have Hivos. We have-- 350.org and so on. So it's a mix of traditional, well-known foundations and some activist organizations.

And what the government of India is saying is that these people are funding organizations which are violating the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act. So we have a specific act, (BEEP) which was done after the-- the brief period of-- emergency that we had in India, the only time we were-- democracy was suspended.

And this act, in many ways, I would say, is (THROAT CLEAR) fairly draconian. And in the act-- the government has to give a particular clearance to a non-- not-for-profit to be able to access foreign resources. So the government's position formally is that-- these international donors are violating the norms of FCRA. That's the standard-- position that the government is taking, broadly.

But let me, you know, I'm gonna just be speaking for 10 to 15 minutes. So let me just go to the core of what I think is happening. I really think that this is a contest, and because you're talking of the contested spaces. I also think that what's happening in India is really a contestation on the idea of India.

It's-- it's essentially that you have an idea of India which is, essentially, built around the fundamentals of a secular, democratic republic. And we have a current regime which is extremely uncomfortable with the broad consensus that we have had, say, around our constitution.

So over the years, we've had significant changes, political changes, in terms of the-- the larger consensus in-- in our country. But this consensus has still not been challenged. And it's with this regime. (BUZZ) It's particularly the BJP now which wants to challenge this consensus. (COUGH) And it sees, (BUZZ) broadly, the left liberals, who occupy the civil society space, the spaces that (BEEP) we talk of, as the biggest challengers and the biggest defenders-- of-- of this idea of India.

And I think this is a direct assault on people who are defending the idea of India.

That-- that's how I look at it. I would also say, just to take this further, this is a critical moment. Because-- to be-- not to be very uncharitable to this government, even the previous regime (BEEP) was using-- a lot of repressive measures against the not-for-profits, including, you know, something as bizarre as sedition charges, if you're challenging a nuclear plant in Tamil Nadu. Actually, sedition charges were-- filed against many of the activists.

But what's happening is that, with the previous regime, it was essentially the economic right. But now, there's a complete overlap of the economic right and the social right with the-- the BJP government, which is the-- which is largely the Hindutva brigade. So they coming together is gonna be-- make the situation far worse. And that's what we are seeing.

At this moment, people can say that it's been triggered by specific cases. It's like a personal grudge story, say, for the Ford Foundation. Because-- Ford Foundation supported these Teesta Setalvad. (COUGH) And many of you would know Teesta was pursuing cases against Narendra Modi for the 2002 (UNINTEL).

In fact, I've informally heard-- somebody actually who-- who met the prime minister. And-- and the prime minister said that, "It's because of these activists." And he calls us now the five-star activists. (BEEP) This is the first time I'm taking pride in saying that I'm a five-star activist. (LAUGHTER) So where he-- he is-- he said, "Because of these five-star activists, I couldn't become the prime minister in 2009. Otherwise, I would have been a prime minister in 2009."

So-- so that's-- that's the personal grudge he holds against people like Teesta Setalvad and, by extension, many of us. But as I'm saying, I don't see this as a limited grudge story. It's much broader. It's-- it's really about the idea of India. Let me just move-- a little further and-- and talk about the FCRA itself and-- and what's happening with foreign funding.

Foreign funding in India has-- you know, has been extremely tenuous in many ways. It has supported a lot of serious right space work. It has supported a lot of international-- s-- it's a lot of groups which get into structure questions of poverty, how we work, politically, because of our post-colonial sensibilities.

Foreign-funded entities have never been at the forefront of social movements or social change. They've largely played a role of either being-- a support entity or being a resource, as Helenia (PH) (BACKGROUND VOICES) and I worked with the National Center for Advocacy Studies, which was a f--

BIPASHA RAY:

Hang on one second. Could I-- sorry to interrupt. Could I ask-- folks on the line to mute? Sorry.

AMITABH BEHAR:

Shall I?

BIPASHA RAY:

Go ahead, yeah. Sorry--

AMITABH BEHAR:

So-- so I was saying that-- so Helenia and I worked with the National Center for Advocacy Studies. And-- and this was working as a huge resource for a lot of social movements. But we always said, "We cannot take the leadership role," because we were foreign funded.

And we would provide research support, media advocacy (COUGH) support, parliamentary advocacy support, but never at the forefront of-- of-- movements. And we do understand that, in India, given the post-colonial sensibilities, foreign-funded en-- entities (THROAT CLEAR) still have some level of-- trust deficit in terms of the public-- arena.

And when I say, "trust deficit," trust in terms of what could be the agenda of these foreign-funded agencies. And that's something which, again, this government is playing on. But I do thing, particularly after this government has come, that one of the good things that's happened is there's now much more closing of ranks amongst the civil society.

So social movements and foreign-funded entities are coming together. And we are saying that this is a moment of building solidarities. And international solidarities are also as important (SNIFF) as-- local solidarities. And we need to challenge this tag also of-- of, if you are foreign funded, it's not that you're doing a bidding of a foreign agency or a foreign corporation.

We are very rooted entities in our country. And therefore, we have legitimate right to push and-- and deepen the rights of the marginalized and excluded. So that's-- that's the-- the shift that-- that's happening. But that's a debate which is also-- happening in the public arena.

So if you look at the-- the media at this moment, it's-- it's very interesting. There's been tremendous amount of support, and which is very unusual f-- coming from the media, to the civil society. So even-- if you look at the Greenpeace story, there's largely support for (BEEP) Greenpeace. Post-Ford, there's been support for Ford. But there is an underlying narrative in the media which also talks of lack of accountability of NGOs and so on.

So that's another point that I wanted to bring in. That is, you know, this-- this perception that's very often created and, I think, in this media and the right wing

goes together, is that NGOs are totally unaccountable, whereas, if you look at, actually, the-- the legal requirements, (BEEP) we do as much as private entities.

So we have a Foreign Contribution Regulation Act registration. We need to fill our-- file our returns around that. We have income tax returns. We have the Charity Commissioner returns. So we are filing returns the way the private entities do that, whereas, now, one of the biggest success any government in India feels is how much foreign-directed investment they've got.

And you are doing red carpet for foreign-directed investment for the private sector. You're talking of single-window clearance. But when it comes to the social sector, (THROAT CLEAR) you're constantly saying, "The money is not welcome. We scrutinize it. It has to go through FCRA now-increasing watch list and so on." So there is obviously, there-- there's this complete dichotomy, which is also-- unacceptable.

And-- and finally, what I would also say is, two-- two more things, that this is also a contestation for the civil society space, where a lot of this funding, informally, I hear from RSS-backed entities, that they would want these resources. And they are keen that the money that comes into this country should actually be coming to them.

So it's about where the money is going and who gets those resources. And-- and that's-- that's quite-- a reality with-- RSS-- fronted organizations. M-- maybe I'll stop here and (BEEP) and happy to then take ques-- questions and-- and build on--

BIPASHA RAY:

Sure, sure. Thank you. Thank you, Amitabh. Prashant, would you like to-- address any of the points that-- that Amitabh made or-- or may have other points of your own?

PRASHANT SHARMA:

Yeah, hi. Just-- just-- just a few things broad that I think might be more interesting as Amitabh pointed out to open it up for discussion. But I'm glad he, of course, pointed out that, you know, it's not-- which is where he needs to take a slightly sort of larger view rather than (UNINTEL PHRASE) this regime or-- or-- or that regime or previous regimes. I think it's-- it's the larger questions which are perhaps-- being played out.

One is, of course, I mean, as-- as-- as he also pointed out that, you know, even in the last-- UPA government, of course, I mean, and when we say the crackdown, what do we mean by the crackdown? Because we don't-- do we have some (UNINTEL) data in terms of how many numbers of NGOs, their licenses have been canceled, and so on and so forth, compared to the previous regimes over a period of time? (UNINTEL) whether it's actually in the nature of a crackdown or not.

We have to look objectively at the-- at-- at the data on that front. So I think I haven't

been-- I haven't really been digging around too much. But (UNINTEL) does seem that, even in the UPA, about 4,000 NGOs, their-- FCRA licenses were cancelled. Now, the second thing, of course, I mean, the-- so I'll just leave it at that for the moment. We can-- come back to it later.

The other thing is, I'm not-- quite sure. I mean, on the one hand, the whole point is of-- I mean, the government is doing whatever it is doing and can do on-- on the basis of technicalities. Now, do we-- (BEEP) we-- at the same time, I think we need to accept the fact that there are plenty of organizations which actually do not follow (UNINTEL), do not-- have not filed in the returns in the forms that they have been-- they-- they-- they are-- they are obliged to.

So that means the-- the point I'm-- the larger point I'm trying to make is that once we are in the-- legally in the right, then what do we have to fear, is my point. So if indeed, we have been doing all-- filing all the returns, all the-- all the procedures or all the process, which is also something which (UNINTEL) I'm gonna expect the government to do and all private entities to do to be completely-- but there's, you know, all these big (UNINTEL) scams and this, that, and the other.

But the issues always come up on the technicalities, the procedures, the processes. Where they followed? That's how you get, essentially-- shall we say-- (UNINTEL PHRASE). Or that's where the case is made for something which is illegal or not.

So if we're doing something completely legal, then there's nothing to be afraid of. Because then, let's say, if the government then does something illegal, the matter goes to the court. (COUGH) We were in the case of the-- (AUDIO SKIPS) the-- the-- the Greenpeace issue. The high court did come up with a judgement saying, "Unfreeze those accounts. Because there's no logical, there's no rationale for freezing those accounts."

So we have to also finally have trust in the system, the judicial system, which by the way, I think, especially at the higher levels, is fairly largely-- fair. So I think that's something which we also have to look at ourselves in terms of civil society and so on and so forth, at what exactly are we-- are we really following, to the T, the processes and laws of the land, which we expect, of course, the government to do?

So they expect (UNINTEL) we have from other entities, whether it's the media or political parties and even, especially, in the context of accountability and transparency. I mean, if civil society organizations and-- and-- and NGOs-- are-- I mean, are-- they-- they-- they-- they demand a certain level of-- accountability from the government.

They-- but the same level of accountability and transparency must be there, right? Often enough, you know, I look at NGOs and their-- and their websites and so on and so forth, their organizations, and their websites. I look at their-- their financial reporting.

Most of the time, it's pretty opaque. And these are-- these are large organizations I'm talking about. They're receiving (UNINTEL) and so on and so forth. So if there is opacity-- this may not be (UNINTEL). I'm not-- I'm not-- I'm not saying-- I'm not--

I'm not-- promoting a conspiracy theory.

But it is the reality, whether it's the lack of capacity, or whether (UNINTEL PHRASE) necessary, or for whatever it-- there may be. I think that level of public scrutiny, which we expect of others, if we ourselves are public actors, we must apply it to ourselves as well, in that (UNINTEL) level of detail as well. I think that level of detail becomes important. Because that is what p-- public perception is, often enough, linked to. So that's the other-- sort of broad point in terms of-- (COUGH)

AUTOMATED FEMALE VOICE:

This meeting has ended due to a lack of activity. (LAUGHTER)

PRASHANT SHARMA:

You know--

BIPASHA RAY:

Prashant, if you wanna disconnect on the Blue Jean site, I think that's telling us there's been lack of activity. (LAUGH)

PRASHANT SHARMA:

(UNINTEL PHRASE) I really have--

BIPASHA RAY:

Okay, all right.

PRASHANT SHARMA:

I'm not there at all. It might be someone else. Somebody got, obviously, (NOISE) bored by what I was saying. (LAUGHTER)

BIPASHA RAY:

It might've been on our end. We got-- no, go ahead. (LAUGHTER)

PRASHANT SHARMA:

This-- and you see, that also (UNINTEL PHRASE) we come to a larger question. We thought we-- which we-- but we want-- (UNINTEL PHRASE). We want the state to-- to-- to actually enforce the law of the land across the board. But when, often-- these aren't political actions.

I'm not saying that there is no politics in this. But we have to be prepared, at our own end, (NOISE) to be willing to follow the law of the land to-- to (UNINTEL) detail possible. If we're not willing to be-- if we're not going to be doing that for whatever reasons, then that is going to essentially leave a huge-- shall we say-- you know-- an-- an opportunity for-- for-- for-- for-- for an attack, essentially.

So I think that's something which needs to be really-- kept in mind. And it's-- it's-- it's invariable. I mean, all the big foreign NGOs, which I have-- or big organizations, you know, which I keep looking at them. And they really do not follow that level of detail in terms of, particularly, their financial reporting.

Then-- then the other thing is, of course, I mean, the idea which I think we-- we (UNINTEL) that-- I mean, (UNINTEL) independence. I think that's the other thing which we have to recognize that, whether money is coming domestically or from the government or from corporate or from foreign donors, nothing is independent. Everything is political.

So once we acknowledge that, and once we say-- so-- so any-- any-- any entity which claims that we are independent of any kind of pressures, because we-- we-- we do not take money from the government, I think that's only telling half the story.

Because when we are looking for funds from any source and different sources, we are going to-- I mean, we know how the funding world operates. We are not necessarily going to-- tomorrow I want to, sort of, you know, do a little bit of research on-- on-- on, you know, the mating habits of the upper-- of-- of peacocks in the upper Himalayas.

It is going to be much more difficult to find funds that-- funds for that than-- something completely different, which is part of the funding and the agenda of larger global-- international actors. So I mean, there is-- there is politics in that. You must recognize it, acknowledge it, and then move on from that, which is fine.

But that must be acknowledged that there is nothing known as independent resources, independent funds, which means you're completely independent, do-- do whatever you want to do, except for the Open Society Foundation, I might add.

(LAUGHTER)

FEMALE VOICE:

Strategic disclaimer.

PRASHANT SHARMA:

Which I think is wonderful.

MALE VOICE:

They have funded a lotta peacock studies, actually. (LAUGHTER)

PRASHANT SHARMA:

And then-- so then-- so I think that's also something which we need to then take into account. And then of course, there is a larger picture. There is a larger journey going on. (BEEP) And I-- I'm not so sure. I mean, I-- I-- I find it very difficult and even-- even if not the-- the-- the thing of, you know, the idea of India. And it's-- it's a factor for that.

We have-- I mean, there are ideas. There's not one idea for (UNINTEL). I think there are ideas. And there's duality in those-- in that pr-- in that notion itself, there is duality. We can't just-- we-- we can't reject that. And there is a larger journey going on in terms of, you know, what is democracy?

What is this notion of self? What is an old notion of-- the whole notion of (UNINTEL) self. I mean, 10 years ago, all foreign aid was-- was rejected or something around that time. We said, "We don't need that." So then all those-- and the ones which are also at play. And-- and-- and those things (BEEPING) (UNINTEL).

But of course, there is the whole thing of (UNINTEL) of foreign money coming from-- coming from post-colonial-- (UNINTEL PHRASE) pointed out. But at the same time, there is-- I think it can also be seen. And then, at the same time, we also have discussions about, you know, what-- what-- there is a lack of local philanthropy. And we don't really have the same kind of-- money being generated.

But at the moment, you know, we have things like corporate (UNINTEL) money coming in. We will-- we will see that with suspicion as well. Or there's going to be (THROAT CLEAR) a common agenda in that. So there is suspicion all around. There's always going to be contestation all around.

But we-- the point is I'm not-- very often, I find a way of the-- generally speaking, in terms of the larger narrative and discourse, what is it that we want? We want the freedom of-- we want a lot of resources to do the kinds of things that we want to do, sure. We want the resources, either it comes from domestic sources, sure. We also want complete independence-- from-- from-- from-- from any kind of interference, and sure. We want many things. But at the same time, (UNINTEL) to say that, yes, we want them. But first, we really understand that resources and money, particularly, is n-- is never apolitical. It's never apologetic, whether it come from corporate or coming from foreign sources or coming from domestic sources. It's never really free money in that sense.

So then within that larger discussion, which we're talking about, in terms of where are-- where-- where are resources going to be generated from-- you know, we need to start thinking in terms of maybe this (UNINTEL) foreign funding is being-- is being discouraged.

Maybe this is an opportunity to start talking about, why are we (UNINTEL) if the economy is doing so well, if we are doing-- if there are so many organizations and (UNINTEL PHRASE) or-- or people or individuals and so on and so forth? (UNINTEL PHRASE) we want to build a much more-- sort of aware-- citizenry and so on and so forth, which is going to be involved in this-- these political processes and projects.

Fine, then let us find the resources and fund (UNINTEL). Why not? Then of course, (UNINTEL PHRASE) you know, what is foreign? What is not? At what point does foreign money become domestic money and so on and so forth, because we're living in a globalized world?

These are all discussions. So broadly, what I'm saying is, this is-- there is a process. Right now, we are going through a great period of change in (UNINTEL), many aspects of which we are not comfortable with. Other aspects, we judge, perhaps, more positive.

There are many things we are gonna-- and I don't mean the last one year of the (UNINTEL). I'm talking about the last 10, 15 years, particularly in (BEEP) (UNINTEL PHRASE) period. So there are many (UNINTEL) ongoing at the same time. And I (BEEP) definitely don't view it as a completely doom-and-gloom scenario.

But it's merely because, on the one hand, and even if there is-- I mean, especially when-- when-- I think there is a bit of a conceptual jump, when you say that there has been-- there has been (UNINTEL PHRASE) with the crackdown on foreign resources, that there's been a stifling of the (UNINTEL).

And there's been a stifling of (UNINTEL), the media would not be supporting the vision. If there was a stifling of freedom of speech, we would not have all these discussions and debates taking place. I am not quite sure that stifling of-- would be the correct word.

Yes, I think a certain perspective is becoming-- is getting more traction than it used to. (UNINTEL PHRASE), I'm not so sure. But-- the point is, a greater, more-- more-- deep, I think. This deeper debate needed to happen. And I think it's going to continue for a while.

It's not something we just (UNINTEL) we-- we-- we-- come-- which is gonna come to closure very soon. Because again, there's not one singular idea of India. There are ideas of India. And there are ideas of Indias, if you will. And these are-- these are (UNINTEL) which will continue for the-- I think the next-- at least-- good 15 to 20 years, if not longer. So that's really my little (UNINTEL). And-- (LAUGH) so yeah. Let's open the discussion.

BIPASHA RAY:

Thank you, Prashant. And I think you-- both of you have given us a lot of food for thought and a lot of food for good discussion. So-- I appreciate your contribution. I'll give Amitabh a little bit of time to respond to that. And also, as part of your response, if you could also think through and help us think through ways forward. What comes after? What comes after this particular-- period that you're-- you're going through in civil society right now?

AMITABH BEHAR:

Okay. So-- Bipasha, to-- to the-- your (UNINTEL) in terms of moving forward, I'm not very sure. Because the nature of this conversation is more to probably generate ideas and discussion. Because I certainly have clear thoughts in terms of what Open Society could do, what entities like Open Society ought to do in this moment.

But I'll-- I'll still share that but-- but with that-- word of caution. Let-- let me just go back to what Prashant said. And let me take two or three things head on. In terms of the first thing that I do think that there is a crackdown that's happening.

Let me just give you instances. The first one-- the inf-- intelligence bureau, I don't know if people know about this. We have-- something like-- a police intelligence bureau which works only for the regime and not for the state the way we have seen (BEEP) over the last few decades.

It leaked out a report as soon as the Modi government took over. The report made bizarre claims of saying that Indian (COUGH) NGOs build anti-development campaigns which-- adversely affect India by 3% to 4% of its GDP-- no data to say how they've come up to these conclusions.

If you just read that report, there are such bizarre conclusions there-- where it-- it clearly said that NGOs are trying-- they're anti-development and, therefore, anti-national and have not talked about it in India, at this moment. And-- and people-- like I was talking fairly positively about the media. But I think it's more of the print media, people like Arnab Goswami. Everybody knows Arnab Goswami. He's-- I don't know if people know. He's-- he's--

MALE VOICE:

The Bill O'r-- the Bill O'Reilly of India.

BIPASHA RAY:

Good-- good comparison. (LAUGHTER)

AMITABH BEHAR:

I'm sure he's-- I'm sure he's worse than Bill O'Reilly.

MALE VOICE:

Bill O'Reilly--

AMITABH BEHAR:

Okay. Okay, so-- so he has been saying that, if you are challenging any developmental projects, then you are being anti-national. So that's also being conflated. (COUGH) Any developmental work, where-- even if there's displacement, you are raising the questions of displacement.

You're q-- raising the questions of rights of the Adivasi, the indigenous population, then you are being dubbed as anti-development and, therefore, anti-national. And that's what the government is doing. (BEEP) From that IB report to, currently, what's happened with-- Greenpeace, so I agree with Prashant.

BIPASHA RAY:

And the IB report was under the previous government.

AMITABH BEHAR:

No. It was this-- this government. It was leaked by this government. It was written by the--

BIPASHA RAY:

Okay. Well, it was lea-- it was leaked--

AMITABH BEHAR:

--by the previous government, yes--

BIPASHA RAY:

It was written by the previous government, yeah.

AMITABH BEHAR:

Greenpeace, Prashant, I agree (THROAT CLEAR) that, you know, we've-- we-- they went to the court. They won the case. But do you know that just two days ago, they have said that they're closing sh-- their offices in India? Because the-- even the Indian accounts, they've been able to raise 70% of their budgets from Indian sources. That's also been frozen now. So they can't access any of their-- accounts.

Again, (NOISE) reasons. Ford Foundation, I was just telling Bipasha, before we entered this-- meeting, Ford Foundation has not been sent a single letter in the last three weeks. And the government is constantly leaking-- stories to the media saying that Ford is on the watch list and-- and so on, but no communication to the Ford Foundation.

CORDAID sent a letter to the government of India saying, "Why have you put us on watch list?" No response. So I-- I do think that there is a clear (COUGH) design in what's happening. It's not about procedural lapses. If it was about procedural lapses, there is the due process.

And government could have easily followed the due process. We would have been very happy and-- and followed the due process. The FCRA itself says that there has to be a notice sent. Only after the show-cause response comes, then you can move towards-- freezing of accounts.

And that also has to happen only through-- the-- the courts coming in. But these people have been completely violate-- violating the entire procedural norms of-- of due-- process legally and also of-- of-- FCRA. The second question of accountability, again, Prashant, I would be very, very happy for your advice and anybody's adv-- advice in terms of, how do we present our finances?

We totally understand that we need to be far more transparent and accountable than even others. So-- so I'm pretty all right with the basic premise that you are saying. But I'm saying that, with a reasonable degree of confidence, that if you want to-- I-- I don't know if it's a presentation issue, which-- entities you have seen.

But we would be very, very happy to share all details of how our finances function. And I'm saying this for not one, many other entities. So there's really no question of lack of accountability. And then if you're talking of lack of accountability, then I think-- you just need to come up with what-- what is the information?

We have-- many of us have been now even saying that NGOs should be in that-- purview of-- right to information, which we are not at the moment. But we are very happy-- to do that. And the third question, which is about politics, I don't want to get into it. I have very strong views on that as well.

But this is not really about-- the way I see is not about the political agenda, the way (COUGH) the government is trying to talk of it. It's really about, can you do civic action in this country or not, so-- sorry, in-- in-- in-- in India or not? It's about the democratic space.

Why should the government stop us from getting funding from wherever? So I'm not entering into that debate of whether it's political or not, though I-- I-- I disagree with-- with al-- almost the-- the-- the-- the way you-- say that there's no-- no autonomy.

Yes, I-- I largely agree with the point that you are making. But I have worked with the Ford Foundation for the last 15 years. I have not got a single call in terms of how we would-- implement our program. And I've got large funding from the Ford Foundation.

Yes, the broad design of what you're working on is agreed on together. But who do we work with? What are the political positions we take? I have never heard. I work with at least 10 different international donors. And no international donor has ever told me-- to work with a political agenda. So I-- I want to contest that, you know?

It's-- it's-- it's fairly simple just to say that-- that-- international donors have agendas. Yes, in the larger scheme of things, one can always talk of it. You know, in academics, I-- I am willing to-- accept that, in the larger scheme of things.

But project to project, year to year, decade to decade, I don't see an agenda being pushed. I hope-- the-- the distinction I'm making is-- is (NOISE) clear. (COUGH) So yeah, I just wanted to particularly come in with-- those three points. And yes, Indian philanthropies need to be-- we need to connect with them, engage with them.

Again, I was telling (UNINTEL), Bipasha, before I came in, the last one week, I got calls from two of the-- the-- probably the richest Indians saying that, "In this current crisis, how do we support the Indian civil society? We do realize that, Indian philanthropy is very nascent. We are not interested in social justice issues. But is there a way of now entering into that space?" So yeah.

BIPASHA RAY:

Thank you. Thank you, Amitabh, for-- for c-- countering some of these-- points that Prashant-- brought up from his end. I think there's a lotta food for thought on both sides. And-- and certainly, I'm sure there are many questions around the table.

So let me just throw it out there. And then maybe I can return back then with-- a few (COUGH) specific questions-- as we move into the discussion. Anybody in the room? Fawzia and Sanjay (PH). (COUGH) So maybe we'll take two sets of questions and then-- have Amitabh and-- and Prashant-- respond to-- to those together.

FAWZIA:

It's not so much as a question but just-- just a point of information. I think many of you know, or some of you don't, that I actually wear-- two hats in India. Because I'm allowed to stray into-- the work of-- of-- of OSF. And I've worked on the India program (COUGH) and all that.

And it's a very odd situation for me. Because I actually am a shareholder and investor in India. So-- and then I have this other half of me, which does-- you know, the work that-- that all of-- all of you do. And I can go to India with my investor hat-- and besides my-- my place of birth, I can sail right through and-- and do my business.

And then I change my hat and go into India with a different persona. And I have a different sensibility and different sense of worry-- especially these days, about-- and it has nothing to do with my place of birth. It has everything to do with the fact that I (COUGH) represent-- OSF and the kind of work that we wish to do. But I'm the same person. It's the same organization. It's all coming from the same place.

You know, we are going to have \$56 million committed to India in investments. And it's-- it's just a very odd situation. And I live it personally-- in that way. As far as accountability and transparency and-- and books and finances, the space that we invest in and the stage of investments that we invest in, we create the transparency and the good books and the good finances, et cetera, et cetera.

It's not handed to us, because it's coming from the private sector. And therefore, the private sector is more accountable and more transparent than the not-for-profit sector. We spend a lot of time fixing problems before we put in even a dime into our investments.

So I think that the issue of transparency is not a valid issue for why a crackdown or a semi-crackdown is happening. Because I have-- you know, I can obs-- I can be an observer and a participant, I have to say, it's-- it's entirely worrisome as to-- as to the-- the kind of arguments that are being thrown out for why the crackdowns are happening.

And I think that-- it's-- it's a very bizarre situation. And I feel it's a very bizarre situation personally. Because I'm Soros Economic Development Fund. And I'm (THROAT CLEAR) Open Society Foundation. And at what point is India going to, you know, become-- closed off-- on-- at both ends for us? And-- and it's something that we-- we think about.

And just to finish off in my-- in my last (THROAT CLEAR) board meeting-- because now, Chris Stone and Ethan Zuckerman are on the board. And-- and both-- asked me that question head on. You know, "How are you navigating-- the world, the new world, where you are (COUGH) an investor and then, you know, the way the not-for-profits are being treated?" So it's-- it's something that we, as an institution, actually face, real time, every single day-- I think.

BIPASHA RAY:

That's a really interesting insight. (THROAT CLEAR) Thank you, Fawzia. Also, because you have that special role at the Open Society Foundations that, I think, is not shared across the foundation. So thank you. Sanjay?

SANJAY:

Yeah. I-- I-- I wanna pick up on this theme-- raised through the discussions and Fawzia's comment. So going back to this idea that this is a contestation of the idea of India, I think what I'm observing, and this is just to play the role of devil's advocate, is you know, what's been common from the previous regime and how they've applied FCRA to the current regime is in an economically liberalizing era-- the view that civil society-- is an impediment to that project, right?

And we can interrogate whether that's true or false. But the truth is is that that's the perception amongst people in power, amongst the aspirational middle class. If you look at, say, Tata Nano in West Bengal and the farmers disputing the acquisition of land to create that plant and then that resulting in the relocation of the plant to a more investor-friendly environment, like Gujarat, that is seen as a prima facie instance of where civil society disrupted the ability for economic growth to take place in a particular locale.

And those that were more open to investment were, therefore, the beneficiaries of, like, a relatively less robust civil society. Now, we would say, "robust." They would say, "interfering." And so I guess my point here is-- is there not some legitimacy in this idea that the civil society-- sector-- is an impediment, (COUGH) is an obstacle to this kind of economically liberalizing effort, which the-- the-- the (BEEP) aspirational class of India, the people who voted for Modi in overwhelming numbers-- view as something to be addressed, so whether it's nuclear power.

So issues of power have, like, actually dated back to, I mean, for a while, but really came to the fore with the Narmada-- the dam and then with, you know, everything from there to coal to-- nuclear power. Like, India needs energy. And the civil society folks are disrupting the ability for India to acquire-- and establish power-- for driving the economic engine.

So I guess I just wanted to inquire with both of you, Prashant, maybe even Fawzia may want to feed into this, but this-- this idea of India really only succeeds, if people have the basics. And can it be said, fairly, that civil society, in their quest for political and civil rights, may be interfering in economic and social rights?

BIPASHA RAY:

Would you like to respond, Amitabh? And then Prashant, if you have thoughts too, (BEEP) add-- add after. Go ahead.

AMITABH BEHAR:

(THROAT CLEAR) So thank you, Fawzia, for saying what you said. And I totally agree with-- that. In-- in fact, you know, just-- just to (COUGH) push this argument a little further, and-- and I feel very uncomfortable with this entire accountability

argument. Because is there a crackdown happening on businesses in India? No. And they're as-- unaccountable as n-- not-for-profit sector--

BIPASHA RAY:

You need a female board of directors. (LAUGHTER)

AMITABH BEHAR:

And we don't have that. If you-- and then I've been now working on CSR. And there's absolutely no data in terms of what they're doing-- in CSR. So they're lack of accountability is as bad. So you know, I would really be very, very uncomfortable (BEEP) in saying that NGOs are unaccountable.

Maybe there's a lack of accountability across sectors. And that's a much larger national question. But-- but-- I have been constantly saying, and I'm fairly confident that most of the FCRA organizations are more accountable than business organizations.

And I say this with responsibility. I'm willing to actually put my reputation at stake. I'm willing to put, you know, actually take r-- records, you know, just look at the reliance (?) and-- and the kind of-- accounting systems they have. Everybody knows about all of this. So-- so that is the accountability question.

What you're saying-- Sanjay, isn't that-- I would really contest what you're saying. Because-- what India needs is-- is-- eradicating poverty. What India needs is dignity for poor people. What India needs is rights of the poorest of the poor and the most excluded.

So the civil society is actually trying to protect the rights, basic rights, of the poor people and of the most excluded groups. (BEEP) So I really don't understand, how are you juxtaposing the two that you're, in a way, then buying into the argument that only-- (BEEP) an economic growth model will-- ensure, eventually, any-- sort-- sort of elevation of poverty.

So that's-- that's what you are saying. I totally disagree with that. In fact, what we are saying is, now we're getting into a larger political-economic debate. Look at India. It still has one-third of the global poor in India. According to government estimates, we have 30% who don't-- who live below the poverty line.

And mind you, Indian poverty line is a hunger line. It's not a poverty line. According to (UNINTEL PHRASE), which a lot of people contest, but that says 80% of people live at less than half a dollar-- a day. So what are we talking about? (THROAT CLEAR)

We are saying that these people are not benefitting by the kind of economic model

we have. And I think everyb-- we are not getting into that debate. The civil society should have the legitimate right to challenge this. The political parties were gonna-- be challenging this.

To make that assumption that, because some of the energy questions or some of the kind of traditional infrastructure development project, which would lead to thousands and thousands of people displaced. If we are opposing that, we are being anti-development and, eventually, hitting at the poor. So I-- I don't-- get the argument at all.

SANJAY:

But if you look at, say, the economic development of India pre-1990 versus post-1990, it's not as if Nehruvian socialism lifted a lotta people out of poverty, right? Like, India was poor, has been poor--

AMITABH BEHAR:

For sure.

SANJAY:

--for-- you know, since independence, pre-independence. And that-- that-- sort of that level of poverty has never really changed. What has changed, though, and I think it's inarguable, is that post-1990, you've had economic development that has risen the livelihoods of many, many millions of people within India.

So if you compare now to, say, pre-'90, there is a significant difference. Now is-- I take your point that there is still poverty, right? Like, it's not that there is-- there isn't poverty. Like, that hasn't been eradicated. But-- but you can't argue that, through (COUGH) economic development measures that were instituted post-'90, there has been a reduction in overall poverty in India based on those developments.

And so the question that I think a lot of people have amongst the aspirational middle class, particularly those who voted for Modi, is, "How do we get more of that to actually lift up more people in India than what has currently been the case?"

So it's to continue that trajectory of development. And how do you do that? You need energy to do that. Like, that-- like, th-- there is no-- like, as far as I know, unless people in the room or on the phone know differently, like, you need energy to do that. And if you don't, then you are stuck in an economically depressed context. And so when you look at, like, the issues related to land and-- those kinds of issues-- I mean, how do you square the-- the-- the demand and thirst for energy in India and how civil society stakes its position on some of these questions?

BIPASHA RAY:

I think we have a few folks who wanted to follow up on-- on that. Just very quickly, Prashant--

(OVERTALK)

BIPASHA RAY:

--do you have any quick additions here? Then we'll go to Fawzia and Els, or sorry, Els and Fawzia, if that's okay--

PRASHANT SHARMA:

Yeah, just-- just-- just a bit-- bit of-- I think of-- (UNINTEL PHRASE) of the India accountability part that seems to have-- just-- you know-- (COUGH) (UNINTEL PHRASE) and Fawzia's issue is not whether (BUZZ) this is a valid argument of the government or not.

The-- I think the larger point is that, if we can ensure that certain very, very high standards of accountability are maintained by civil society organizations, which are very-- remain transparent, then that gives that much less ammunition to anybody who is out to essentially take a potshot or take-- or do a crackdown or whatever.

That is the larger point. The point-- it's not about (UNINTEL) accountable or not accountable. It's not (UNINTEL PHRASE) accountable or not accountable. I think it's a larger principle that we espouse a certain principle. And the best thing which we must and can do is to put systems in place which ensure that there is a certain level of accountability. It strengthens us and our positions. That's the only point on the accountability part-- which I really want to (UNINTEL PHRASE).

On the-- on the-- on the larger issue, which-- which is economic growth versus (UNINTEL), that's-- a pretty heavy discussion. (LAUGHTER) So I expect that we-- but-- but maybe I should-- so we need to have several beers (UNINTEL).

BIPASHA RAY:

Beers. (LAUGHTER)

MALE VOICE:

That's funny--

BIPASHA RAY:

But I-- I do think that's a train of thought that others in this room-- perhaps want to continue or-- or maybe, Els, was-- was your comment related to--

ELS:

Well, yeah. It was actually just to-- to-- to say, like, there is nothing specifically in the (UNINTEL) that conversation and about-- I mean, this is about challenging the global-- the dominant economic world order and whether it's (THROAT CLEAR) here in the U.S., whether people g-- in civil society groups protest against fracking-- or, I mean, against the-- the dominant-- the genetically modified foods-- taking over control of the food chain.

I mean, this is not an Indian. And-- and so I think-- while I take your point that-- that I mean-- I mean, and it's-- so it's also about development. It's actually about how the economic system today-- functions. But where I do agree that, (LAUGH) I mean, that's where civil society has-- a critical role to challenge that.

And it's not only about that-- that the-- what makes the world turn around. And it's good for people. It's not just creating more jobs and-- and cr-- economic growth. It's-- it's not the parameter. But that is a much broader discussion. So yeah.

BIPASHA RAY:

I think Fawzia had something to--

FAWZIA:

Yeah, just very similar to what Els is saying. But I think I wanna, like-- you know, just-- just dial back a little bit. I think it's very important, Amitabh, for us to recognize that a lot of this began in the UPA government in the s-- maybe in the latter half of the government.

And some extraordinarily disappointing and dangerous precedents were set by the UPA government and the way (COUGH) the whole ministry-- c-- you know, turned India into a national security state. (THROAT CLEAR) You know, so it-- it-- it-- it was there.

And the Modi government has just managed to take that toolbox and do with it very much what Obama did with Bush, you know? The fact that this kind of extraordinary power is never given back. It is only extended. (THROAT CLEAR) And that is what has happened for political gain.

And there is an all-out witch hunt going on. And there's no doubt that they're going after their detractors. And the NGO sector, not-for-profits, where a lot of the

detractors sit is what-- what-- what is being attacked. And I do think that the fact that it started in the UPA government is really about contesting power. It is the less powerful and those who don't have voice, you know, challenging very powerful forces. And that's what I think this is about, not about lack of proper books. Because lord knows, the sector I invest in maintains two books all the time. (LAUGHTER) So I-- I think--

MALE VOICE:

Only two?

FAWZIA:

Yeah. (LAUGHTER) Only two. And so that-- that, really, I think what's-- what's important for us to understand is that we are being challenged. And we are-- we will-- we may-- what we stand to lose is not a couple of million dollars. What we stand to lose (COUGH) is our ability to provide a platform giving voice to the powerless.

And in India, those numbers are huge by size of the population. So we have a lot to lose. And it is not in dollars and cents, you know? It is that. And I think that is extraordinarily worrisome-- not just for India but for the world at large. Because you know, as India goes, so goes many other so-called democracies. And that's what worries me the most about what happens in India.

BIPASHA RAY:

Thank you. Tom and Milap?

TOM:

Yeah, if I can make one-- I mean, I know you're playing devil's advocate. But I-- I can't resist a quick comment before I ask my question, which is to say, obviously, in the United States, we're very aware of different states that have different approaches to-- regulation of business.

And I would submit to you, (NOISE) as you are probably well aware, that many states that have lower barriers to business enter-- entry actually have lower (COUGH) socioeconomic indicators in terms of education, health, welfare, all of these issues.

And you have a state like New York that has relatively higher levels of regulation that is doing very well on all of these-- fronts. So the-- the argument the Modi government is putting forward is, of course, a very familiar one here in the United States.

I do think it points to the challenge that-- and your point is well taken that this is a

very attractive argument to many Indian voters. And you can't just wish that away. So sort of grappling with that and coming up with a more sophisticated response other than, "We're right. And they're wrong. And Modi's terrible," I think, is-- is necessary.

My question, actually, is more in the-- in the space of government regulation. Do you see, in India, (THROAT CLEAR) you know, running the China program-- we've seen a lot of-- government crackdown. I'm s-- I'm sorry. I'm gettin' a little emotional. Because-- it's been a particular-- particularly difficult time in terms of the work that we've been doing in China recently.

And we've seen a lotta friends go to jail and a lotta-- dynamics that are-- similar to what you're seeing in the Indian-- context. My question is more to-- in terms of one of the-- responses from Chinese civil society groups has been to-- register as private companies and to-- operate in that way.

And you're even seeing the response (THROAT CLEAR) in terms of some international actors also-- registering as private companies, so trying to create a private company cr-- private company relationships, even though both sides are civil society actors. (COUGH)

Are you seeing this in India? And if so, does the government sort of try to pierce the corporate veil-- and-- (BEEP) sort of call a spade a spade and say, "You, international group, are actually not-- a private company. You're a philanthropic entity. And you, domestic actor, you're not a private company. You're also-- a public actor. We're calling your bluff and cracking down on both of you"? Is that-- is that-- is that something you're seeing or not-- not yet?

BIPASHA RAY:

Milap, do you want to--

MILAP:

Yeah, sure. I-- I'll be short, just-- to throw this in the mix. And-- I don't know if it's come up in your work, or if you've seen this, but the role of diaspora community groups and funding for-- I-- I think I can probably guess in which direction a lot of the diaspora funding goes. (LAUGHTER) But--

MALE VOICE:

You (UNINTEL PHRASE).

MILAP:

But is there-- is there-- is there a possibility, (THROAT CLEAR) is there space, is there exploration, of the role of diaspora funding for civil society? Or is-- (LAUGH) on the other side, is there any examination of the accountability, of the transparency, of funding of diaspora groups for-- some of the-- some of the less-salubrious aspects of-- Indian governance?

And is there-- (THROAT CLEAR) is that transparency there? Is that present? Is there any examination of what's happening with diaspora groups and funding of communities in India or political parties, I guess?

BIPASHA RAY:

Amitabh, do you wanna take that first? And then we'll return to-- Prashant.

AMITABH BEHAR:

Okay. Sure, so-- so s-- just quick responses in terms of diaspora. You're absolutely right. Most of the diaspora funding is (UNINTEL) BJP. It goes to RSS-- affiliates. And there are studies (THROAT CLEAR) which actually-- say that. I don't think there is a specific scrutiny of-- the funding coming from the diaspora.

Many of our friends and comrades have been trying to speak to the diaspora. They do actually make visits specifically for having conversations with diaspora. But funding (BEEP) for what is called, say, the structural causes of poverty or for social justice issues coming from diaspora has been very, very small. (BEEP)

So that's-- that's, at the moment-- the way we see it. I'm sure somebody in the room would be a sociologist and would say, "I find it pretty odd that people, when they go and, themselves, face-- some level of discrimination, still, they end up not funding the discriminated or people who are talking of the rights of discriminated but become more conservative in-- in their worldviews." So it's very odd. But that's the phenomena that-- that we have-- always seen.

In terms of your question, you're absolutely right. That's what we are doing, a lot of-- so this is getting recorded. But let me still say that-- I sit on-- an INGO board in India. And-- we are now registering, actually, and-- and pretty much, f-- publically doing that, as a private company. And it's one of the most difficult-- INGOs-- for its existence in-- in-- India.

And we're doing that. And my-- at this moment, the government has not really gone after the privately registered companies. But I'm fairly sure that, (THROAT CLEAR) within a year or two, that will also start happening. So just because it will be registered as a private company, I don't think-- that we'll be let off. Because as I still believe that my-- my-- prognosis of the issue (COUGH) is that it's b-- it's a very (COUGH) (UNINTEL)-- position that the government is taking. And it'll find ways

of-- of doing a crackdown there.

BIPASHA RAY:

Can I just add something there? I mean, my understanding, and maybe this is a micro-- cos-- microscopic point. But my understanding of part of the reasons why the government was going-- against-- or going for Teesta-- and her-- and indirectly, Ford, was partly because her nonprofit was registered as-- as a private-- company. I could be wrong. But I thought that was part of the--

AMITABH BEHAR:

No, and so they're giving multiple arguments and basically saying that-- the money which was given for riot victims has been siphoned off--

BIPASHA RAY:

Right, right. Okay.

AMITABH BEHAR:

That's-- that's-- nobody really knows. There's-- I've spoken to people who were working with Teesta. And they're saying that-- they have a strong case to be able to defend. And-- and that's another problem as-- like I was saying, that the whole problem of, also, the Indian judiciary.

Now, Greenpeace has had to close down. They can go to the court and say that, "Unfreeze our accounts." But that means that it'll take six to eight months. Where will the salaries come from? Where-- how will they function? So-- so the-- that's-- that's a big problem.

Sanjay, if you are playing the devil's advocate, let's leave it (LAUGH) here at the moment. Because it's a much larger debate. It's difficult. Because you know, what-- what you're talking of is-- is-- something which we can't come to-- an agreement so quickly.

But I would really say that-- that the real point is, as what Fawzia said, that it is the space for speaking truth to power, at least challenging power. That's really the critical point. And-- and one of the most important political roles of civil society, I think, on that we would agree, is to be able to challenge power.

And how are you restricting that space of challenging power is the critical question. So I'll not get into that-- that debate as in I'm happy to have that debate-- later. I have very, very strong views on that that, is inequality growing or not?

Are the resources actually reaching the poor? Has it changed in the last two decades and-- and so on? So there are different kinds of studies. And we all have those-- access to those-- different studies. And Fawzia, coming back to-- I totally, totally agree.

So it is really about that space of whether we can speak to-- to power or not. And it's certainly n-- not about \$1 million or \$2 million or a few million dollars. (THROAT CLEAR) It's about, how do we challenge power? And that space is getting restricted. At this moment, the crackdown is on foreign funding.

I-- you know, that's really the big-- big-- big point we are making, that it's not just about foreign funding. It's gradually moved on (COUGH) to-- there, I disagree with Prashant. It'll also be to the right of dissent. It's--

FAWZIA:

It's the (UNINTEL) model. You guys have a lot to talk about. I mean, it's right there in front of us, what the model is--

AMITABH BEHAR:

So it's suspect when you start with the easiest targets. Because I talked of that post-colonial sensibility, which is the foreign funding. From there, you move on to several other social movements. This is a way of cracking down on social movements. And it'll go to the-- dissenting model.

And this government, which has not been appointing a chief vigilance-- commissioner, not ex-- information commissioner. For the last eight months, we don't have an information commissioner. That's part of the law. And they're now talking about-- accountability.

BIPASHA RAY:

Prashant, would you like to respond on any--

AMITABH BEHAR:

Sorry, can I just say--

BIPASHA RAY:

Oh, sorry.

AMITABH BEHAR:

And prash-- no, b-- because you-- (LAUGH) Prashant, I totally agree. I-- I (BEEP) started by saying that we need to be far above board in terms of accountability. And-- and I'm saying that we would be happy to get advice from people like you and many others in terms of, what would even change the public perception? So we need to be-- appear to be-- above board. And on that, we should probably just put (COUGH) all our accounts. And we are happy to do that. That's a conversation which is already happening.

BIPASHA RAY:

Prashant, on all of those points. (LAUGHTER)

PRASHANT SHARMA:

No-- sorry. Just to say-- that's great. But one thing I just-- I think the-- as you were-- (COUGH) this conversation was going, the one thing, of course, which is interesting is, even as we had this conversation (COUGH) (UNINTEL) and she-- (UNINTEL) meeting, right? (LAUGHTER) (UNINTEL PHRASE) and especially because Tom brought up, of course-- China.

But I think that's an interesting thing for us to, again-- if you want to understand something a little bit in a more sophisticated, perhaps, way, in a more nuanced way, I think that's part of the whole thing of this whole imagination, right, I mean, about, what are these ideas of India that we're talking about?

The fact that China, essentially, tells-- the west, you know, "Go-- you know, take a hike and jump. And we'll do our way," it resonates somewhere with a lot of people. The fact this whole notion of, you know-- the fact of self-confidence, reliance, strength, whatever it-- I mean, there's all kinds of-- I know-- I mean, I-- I'm not unaware about all these-- other discussions which are around about the-- you know, this-- the debates around nationalism, the-- nationalism and so on and so forth. All of those things are there.

And this all links in with the whole thing of the whole foreign funding thing as well and partly because some of the arguments which are there and that definitely also which-- which have a certain value. I don't think it can be-- taken away from the argument itself is that all-- the whole idea of taking away the (UNINTEL), that the west and the north is now in a position to preach about human rights and so on and so forth and all these things after having completely (UNINTEL PHRASE) destroyed local populations in the case of (UNINTEL) colonialisms and-- and-- and-- and so on and so forth.

And-- and after that, is now-- after having established an entire model, which is premised on exploitation and so on and so forth, is now telling others what to do and

how to do it. I think that thinking somewhere also is there, which needs to be acknowledged. And appropriate counter and sophisticated, nuanced responses need to be made.

So that's something which I-- this whole thing, I mean, the whole notion of the taking away of the (UNINTEL) kind of a thing. And that's where the China example comes into the picture as well. But where I think we are liking, in terms of ever-- ever-- sort of, you know, mounting a more-- shall we say, sort of nuanced argument about it, is because all of these ideas (BEEP) presume that there is only way and one path towards, essentially, whether you want to call it wealth or-- or industry, (UNINTEL) or-- or-- or-- or-- or sort of (UNINTEL), or eradication, indeed, of poverty.

Now, if there is only one (UNINTEL) path-- and we-- if we get into the arg-- we get into this argument, get into the statistics and so on and so forth, I think that doesn't actually get to the heart of the issue. The response is do-- (NOISE) there are other ways of doing it. And what are they?

And that never-- that never comes up. What are the other ways of actually going or, I mean-- actually (NOISE) bringing people out of poverty without compromising on any of these-- the issues (UNINTEL)? So is it possible? How is it possible? What are the alternate solutions? What are the alternate pathways? Are there any? So we-- but-- because the point is, eventually, just bec-- the reason I think part of the reason of whether there's public protection, particularly in the aspiring middle class, and so on and so forth, the reason has gone against (UNINTEL) in many cases, in many of these-- many civil society organizations partly because the-- the-- the-- the-- the-- the-- the-- the tool is almost always a protest. And this is not.

But then the argument becomes, then what else? That's-- I'm not saying other solutions are not being offered. But that gets drowned out in the noise of this yes, no, yes, no, not this, not this. And other groups have decided, say, "Yes, there should be an alternative way." But where are the alternatives?

Where are they being promoted, projected, celebrated? And that's where-- of course, I mean, like-- like Sanjay pointed out, there is a need for energy. How is it going to be resolved? Instead of saying, "This is not the way to do it," can we say, "This is the way to do it"?

And that's somewhere, I think, some-- something is missing there in terms of providing and proposing and-- and creating alternative ways and pathways. So perhaps, if that thinking could be thought of, and really, that's to me, an area where-- where a lot of-- where-- where-- where, perhaps, it could be even less contested and more productive, even, in some ways-- in terms of-- you know, energizing and dev-- (COUGH) and-- and creating new solutions, new ways of looking at things.

BIPASHA RAY:

Just-- just quickly, Prashant, do you have thoughts on-- on possible alternatives? I'm just-- this is meant-- open question.

PRASHANT SHARMA:

I'll write my next book about it. (LAUGHTER)

BIPASHA RAY:

Okay. So a couple of-- more thoughts. Thank you, Prashant-- from Benenjay (PH) and then from Sanjay.

BENENJAY:

Well, Amitabh, I was resisting the temptation to ask you this question. But since you are coming from Delhi, and now it's-- the urge is becoming unbearable, I need to ask you this. (LAUGHTER) You know-- I've been just thinking about the Indian context.

And I am-- I am-- I am really (BEEP) concerned about the fact that, you know, (UNINTEL) ability to turn into a sort of a polemic interface (COUGH) with the state has always been a contentious issue, if I am seeing it through the lens of people's organization and trade unions.

So-- playing, again, a devil's advocate-- do you think that we, as a left-leaning people, who have been often working in the NGO sector, (NOISE) we have some historical role to play in strengthening some of the left-leaning moments in India, and we f-- fail to do that? I mean-- it's a much larger question that we-- we need to answer.

But most of these radical, important social movements, how, you know, they lost their momentum in front of our eyes. And-- you know, we just simply were not in a position to contribute anything. Because we were worried about the, probably-- about the NGO sector.

BIPASHA RAY:

Thank you. Sanjay, do you want to--

SANJAY:

No, he can answer directly to that. Mine was more of a comment. It's not a question.

BIPASHA RAY:

Okay, okay. So we'll return to Sanjay.

AMITABH BEHAR:

I have a response still for you.

SANJAY:

Oh, okay. (LAUGHTER)

AMITABH BEHAR:

Okay, okay. So you know, just-- three or four thoughts in terms of the conversation we have had. You know, I just want to, still further, at least interrogate, if not directly challenge what you are saying-- Sanjay and what, Prashant, you said.

But even in terms of the popular perception, Modi, when we said has got a convincing majority, actually got only 31% of the poll vote, which was around 67% or 70% this year, in-- in-- last year. So I don't think that the larger Indian people buy this argument.

B, look at what happened to India Shining Campaign. (LAUGH) Vajpayee built that entire campaign on the particular argument that you were talking of, the aspirations and so on. But he lost badly, the India Shining Campaign. And I would say that, in Indian elections, the (THROAT CLEAR) poor people and the excluded people have been constantly casting a vote-- vote against this paradigm of (NOISE) economic model. That's-- that's what I would, you know-- say.

We need to probably look at the-- numbers-- more careful. Just-- just looking at-- the-- the larger question in terms of of, Prashant, what you're saying, you know, this is a standard-- (NOISE) challenge thrown at us in terms of, why do you do no campaigns? And why don't you do yes campaigns?

I don't know enough about the energy sector. So I'll not comment on-- on that. (BEEP) But for instance, again, sitting here, I'm taking a risk, there are too many health experts. But look at, say, the health scenario. It's not that we are not talking of alternatives.

You know, something as simple as just invest much more in the public health system. We are saying that. And we have been saying that for the past 15 years. It's not that we don't have solid alternatives to the way the Indian health system is going.

But it's not heard. And therefore, the protest also happens. And I would really say that, you know, on education, there-- enough alternatives as people are presenting. But it's not being accepted. So it's not that NGOs only come with a no campaign.

There are solid innovations which happen on the ground. And that's where, again, a lot of this foreign funding has helped, where you just nurture an innovation. And then, gradually, it becomes-- hopefully, it can be-- taken to scale. But that's not happening.

It's a larger question we need to look at-- at, ultimately, how policymaking happens. And-- and it is certainly not-- evidence based, to my mind. Coming back to still-- Sanjay, your point, as in now to engage more from-- a positive position and linking with what Benenjay said, I do think that we made a mistake, as the civil society in India, the developmental civil society. We started engaging too much directly with the state.

And particularly, people like you and me, who have done advocacy, advocacy became far more important than organizing and mobilizing people. And I think that's been a fundamental problem with Indian civil society. In fact, we were doing a meeting just two weeks ago to bring everybody together, Indian civil society groups. And-- a former trade unionist said-- and a few of you understand him. Let me first say that in Hindi. He said, (SPEAKING IN HINDI). (LAUGHTER) So if-- you know, you-- you've been in love with the--

BENENJAY:

State.

AMITABH BEHAR:

--state. And then you're saying you will challenge it, it doesn't work. Just look back at the people. They will give you the power. If you have solid organizing, mobilizing, then the government will also not be able to touch you. So-- so I agree that we have, you know, we have failed in many ways and that there are many questions that all of us need to collectively answer.

And that's where I think people like Prashant can academically see that, was that a grand conspiracy of the international funding agencies to make us work more towards advocacy and-- and look at impacts and so on, where organizing and mobilizing is completely out now and so on? So then I'm willing to. You know, the-- those are long-term questions (THROAT CLEAR) which we need to certainly engage with.

PRASHANT SHARMA:

Amitabh, you've been spending too much time with (UNINTEL). You've become quite adept at putting words in other people's mouth. (LAUGHTER) But--

AMITABH BEHAR:

Go ahead. Go ahead.

BIPASHA RAY:

Prashant, go ahead.

PRASHANT SHARMA:

It's not what I think I was saying. And but any case, we can continue our discussions at--

AMITABH BEHAR:

No, but-- but if it-- just let-- (COUGH) you know, which one did I put-- (LAUGH) attribute to you, then I'll--

(PRASHANT SHARMA: UNINTEL PHRASE)

AMITABH BEHAR:

No, you-- you did not say that. I'm-- I'm just saying that-- I-- I'm making it sound-- more-- more black and white. You did not use the word, conspiracy theory, at all. So...

PRASHANT SHARMA:

(UNINTEL) so yeah. No, so that's-- I just wanted to come in with that. But yeah, that-- (BEEP) I mean, that's the only one-- one, quick response I wanted to add.

BIPASHA RAY:

Sanjay, did you want to return to the--

SANJAY:

No, I mean, I just wanted to-- sort of-- sort of question whether movements-- (BEEP) translating movements to governance has proven to be quite a challenge, not just in India, but elsewhere. But in India, you have the specific example of Aam, the Aadmi Party, (NOISE) which tried to do that.

And it has been fraught with challenges. And whether movements can actually govern-- in an equitable-- way is actually a big question mark. So you know, I take the point that maybe emphasis has been placed on advocacy too much. But the truth is is that those who are in favor of movements would also say that the state has a c-- certain responsibility to the citizen. Like, that-- that's part of the social contract.

And translating mass movements into a functional form of governance is actually an open question, whether they can do that. And I think that the value of having the approach that-- has been taken with respect to the advocacy, it's like trying to think through, how do-- how does government, how does the state, how does that social contract be forged in a way that's functional, that's-- fair and equitable?

And I don't know that movements are very good at necessarily having that actually happen as a consequence of their mobilization. And the other thing I would say is just I wanted to reit-- reiterate what Prashant was sort of-- touching upon in terms of, why is it that the Chinese experience resonates with Indians?

And-- and-- and it links to, you know, what Els was saying about this being, like, a project beyond India. And it links to what Milap was saying about the-- kind of the influence of the diaspora. I mean, I'm in a privileged or difficult position in that I have, you know, in-laws in India who voted for Modi who-- ascribe to this aspirational notion of India, part of the diaspora, who also have this sense, which is actually similar to the middle class located in India, which is this civilizational pride of India.

And, you know, the-- the-- the narrative put forward by Modi and by Shining India and all of that really speaks to something rooted deep in the Indian consciousness with respect to what they were once and what they are now. And they take real objection to the *Slumdog Millionaire*-- portrayal of India and the land of snake charmers.

Like, all of that has been sort of the-- the perception of India for so many years that, when somebody taps into the psyche to, like, actually say, "Oh, you're something different from that," it really resonates and appeals to them. And so I think, strategically, in terms of, how do we position civil society's-- you know, approach to some of these vexing questions related to energy or related to the narrative I'm-- I'm discussing, I feel like there hasn't been a sorta strategic equivalent in thinking through, how do you contest these kind of really powerful, almost-- sort of Jungian sort of, you know, core aspects to how and why people perceive themselves or their ethnicity or national identity in the way that they do?

I mean, the Arundhati Roy-esque type of approach is just not going to succeed when confronting these, as Els pointed out, international-- sort of narratives with respect to (BEEP) economic liberalization and development and money and power.

Like, you know, it's-- that's-- I-- I feel like that boat has-- that ship has sailed. And you need a new strategy in India. You're not going to do it through kind of the strategies that have been employed right now.

BIPASHA RAY:

Thanks, Sanjay. Prashant, would you like to talk-- at all to the movement question?

PRASHANT SHARMA:

Yeah, (UNINTEL). Yes, I actually wanted to add a question in that sense. Because I mean-- Amitabh mentioned that-- you know, that-- that one of the mistakes, in some ways, was this-- was about, you know, becoming too close to the state and, actually, going back to the whole thing of mass movements, mobilization. And that's really the-- the real strength-- which-- which civil society-- should perhaps focus on.

This is interesting, because particularly in the q-- question of foreign funding. Because that is the one area where most movements have always publically constantly shunned the idea of foreign funding. (THROAT CLEAR) And-- I mean, there are other layers there, of course-- how it actually works and so on and so forth.

But-- but as a basic principle, basic tenant, I don't know of any social movement, per se, which is sort of grassroots based, which-- which really espoused the idea of foreign funding-- with open arms. So I think, how is that going to-- how-- how do you feel that that's going to be, then-- resolved?

BIPASHA RAY:

(NOISE) S-- Prashant, was that a question-- that--

AMITABH BEHAR:

It was clearly a question.

BIPASHA RAY:

Well, it is a question, (LAUGHTER) but-- but something that-- respond to? Do you wanna talk-- briefly, and we don't have that much time left. Do you wanna talk briefly to the movement question that Sanjay brought up, the-- the movement, how it-- how-- how does movement-- movements turn into political-- you know, governance and political power more broadly? And then we can return to Amitabh for the final words.

PRASHANT SHARMA:

L-- l-- let's-- I think that-- we are. This-- this-- again, Sanjay (UNINTEL PHRASE) it seems like. But this-- (LAUGHTER) yeah, I mean, I think there is-- there is what-- what Sanjay has been saying and, I think, pointing out is-- is-- is an important element. Because I think there is-- it's increasing and especially in the context of what Els said, which I again think is-- has a lot of-- (BEEP) it-- it's something which we need to constantly remind ourselves, that there are much larger structures you're working with or against or along with or within-- depending on your favorite

adjective.

But the-- how-- what are the new-- what-- I think there-- there-- there needs to be some new strategizing, new thinking, new ways of imagining things. Because-- and I don't mean in terms of, you know, what is the largest (UNINTEL)? I mean, indeed, you know, this-- this is the reality we live-- we live with. And that's really not going to change in a hurry.

So how do we exactly-- how do we really think of what are the ways in which that these processes can, indeed be more equitable, more-- more-- more representative, and make sure that it's, you know, ind-- that-- that-- that-- that things don't potentially-- they-- they improve for everybody, not just for a chosen few? I think that is a big question that requires a lot of thinking and a lot of discussion and also but pr-- before any of that, the acknowledgement that this is a much larger issue. And how do you work with that?

BIPASHA RAY:

Thank you, Prashant. Amitabh-- responses, last words--

AMITABH BEHAR:

Yeah, sure, sure. So-- Prashant, just coming back to your question. I-- I think that's-- that's a valid question. And I'd earlier, I think in my initial comments, I did say that (THROAT CLEAR) even within the-- the social movements, there's been skepticism in terms of taking support from-- foreign entities.

In fact, there's been a fairly robust debate internally in terms of, can social movements even do an alliance with foreign-funded entities? So that-- that's been a robust debate. And I-- and I take your point. But-- the reality is, Prashant, the way-- because I really live this reality. I think it's been more of-- gradually, it's become more of a tactical question and less of a principle question.

You know, I-- I have been part of the World Social Forum. And I-- again, this is getting r-- recorded. But I'll still say that-- you know, I-- I heard very bizarre arguments, where people said, "We'll not take funding from the Ford Foundation," in India, when we were organizing the Mumbai Social Forum.

"But if the international secretariat takes money from the Ford Foundation in New York, and we are getting the money from the-- WSF, then it's all right." So I-- I-- I think, you know, you've had instances of this kind, where I think it's really a tactical question.

And I still would say that, given the post-colonial sensibilities of our political-- spectrum, I don't think that foreign-funded NGOs or foreign money (BEEP) can be directly used or should be directly used for organizing and mobilizing.

But for organizing and mobilizing and for that kind of-- work, there's an immense

amount of support work that's needed. I think that's what we need to-- focus on and not start appropriating the leadership role in terms of speaking for the committees and-- and-- and marginalized groups. That's how I look at it.

And I would say that it's more of-- a tactical-- question. In terms of what, Prashant, you said, the first one, that's again, a larger ques-- sorry-- Sanjay, what you said-- in terms of the movement, I would say that give some more time to (UNINTEL) in terms of understanding what's happening.

It's really a short span of time. But I take your point. And-- and that's something I'm sure all of us can collectively see. I don't know how many examples we have globally of how movements have actually transitioned into running governments.

The initial-- indication that you get from the (UNINTEL) government is that they're not being able to do a great job of it. They're all busy, huge problems. You see the entire (UNINTEL) other group getting out and so on. So they're huge problems.

But I would still say, let's give them a year or two and then start evaluating whether this was possible or not. And-- and-- and it's-- it's a very specific-- case. And-- and the-- the larger question, I-- I think, just going back, I-- s-- I totally agree that we do need new strategies.

But as (UNINTEL) keeps saying, that a lot of people talk of this, what you talked of, the narrative of aspirations. And I say that, if there is a narrative of aspiration, at least the people I work with, I see a stronger narrative of anger.

It's not just a narrative of aspiration. It's a narrative of anger. We need to understand that, en-- engage with that anger, and see how it gets then-- channelized into creating (BEEP) new energies and new alternatives and-- and-- and new dreams also. So-- so I am with you that we need-- and with Prashant completely in terms of new ways of thinking.

So post the collapse of the Berlin Wall-- post the collapse of the Soviet Union, we've really not had a big idea which can bring people together. And I think there's an investment needed in terms of trying to see what could be the alternative. So and-- and that's the journey, probably, we, all of us, need to do-- together. Thank you.

BIPASHA RAY:

Thank you very much-- for all of us who joined us. But especially thanks to-- Prashant joining on the phone and, most of all, to Amitabh for-- getting off of a plane just a day ago and coming into our organization and-- and fielding these-- you know, these-- (COUGH) big questions that I think we're all grappling with. And-- these are certainly issues that are playing out in different ways (NOISE) in different countries. But it was great to hear this insight-- from your very real perspective in Delhi. So thank you very much for--

AMITABH BEHAR:

Thank you.

BIPASHA RAY:

--for joining us. And-- thank you all for-- for coming. And to those on the phone as well, thank you. (APPLAUSE) So we'll talk to you all soon.

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

* * *END OF TRANSCRIPT* * *