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Published in:
Voluntary Sector Review

DOI:
10.1332/20408056Y2025D000000035

2025

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Voluntary Sector Review • vol XX • no XX • 1–19 • © Author 2025
Print ISSN 2040-8056 • Online ISSN 2040-8064 • https://doi.org/10.1332/20408056Y2025D000000035
Accepted for publication 19 February 2025 • First published online 13 March 2025

research article

Legitimacy under scrutiny: why some organisations are more vulnerable to restriction than others?

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This article explores the multifaceted challenges to organisational legitimacy encountered by international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) operating in India. It seeks to uncover the factors that make certain organisations more susceptible to regulatory restrictions than others despite operating within a shared geopolitical landscape. The research delves into the complexities surrounding INGO operations in India, particularly those engaging with justice, democracy and rights issues. By qualitatively exploring how different INGOs respond to legitimacy challenges, this article aims to discern the reasons behind this variability, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between legitimacy and the shrinking spaces for INGOs in India. The findings elucidate how legitimacy is used as a key proxy to impose restrictions on organisations perceived as a threat to the government's own political legitimacy. It highlights the critical role that political congruence or divergence with state policies plays in determining the operational landscape for these organisations.

Keywords INGO legitimacy • shrinking civic space • regulatory restrictions • India

To cite this article: Banerjee, S. (2025) Legitimacy under scrutiny: why some organisations are more vulnerable to restriction than others?, *Voluntary Sector Review*, Early View, DOI: 10.1332/20408056Y2025D000000035

Introduction

This article examines a critical issue confronting international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) operating in India: the uneven regulatory landscape and its implications for organisational legitimacy. The research delves into the complexities of INGO operations in India, particularly under the increased governmental scrutiny that labels organisations as 'anti-national' if they oppose or critique government policies. Whilst the Indian government targets INGOs working on justice, democracy, rights, and services, the degree of restrictions and pressures varies significantly among these groups. This article seeks to understand the reasons behind these disparities and how organisations navigate and sustain legitimacy within a challenging political context.

Extensive research on INGOs has predominantly focused on how these organisations strive to secure legitimacy through internal mechanisms such as governance structures, strategic planning and accountability measures (Lister, 2003; Brown, 2008). However, such studies often overlook the broader societal and political dynamics that significantly impact organisational operations (Brown, 2008). Simultaneously, literature focusing on the challenges posed by shrinking civic spaces provides insights into external constraints like government policies and socio-political conditions (Carothers, 2016; Buyse, 2018), but tends to under-explore how organisations proactively engage with, adapt to, and potentially influence these environments. By synthesising these two bodies of research, this article aims to enrich the dialogue on how organisational legitimacy intersects with broader external challenges, particularly the shrinking of civic space. The central inquiry of the article explores the factors contributing to the differential regulatory restrictions imposed on INGOs operating within the same geopolitical landscape and investigates how these organisations respond to such disparities.

The exploration is set against the backdrop of a global trend towards autocratisation that seeks to dismantle various aspects of liberal democracy by undermining the space for civic dissent and organised collective action (Terwindt and Schliemann, 2017; Buyse, 2018). Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a crucial role in shaping dynamic political landscapes, advocating for human rights norms, delivering essential services to communities, engaging with various stakeholders and offering expertise to national governments, thereby maintaining the vibrancy of global politics (Chandhoke, 2007). However, the turn of this century has witnessed a decline in the quality of liberal democracy, marked by the surge of illiberalism, populism and fundamental disruptions in global politics and development (Lewis, 2013; Froissart, 2014). This wave of illiberal trends has led to what many academics and human rights activists describe as a 'global crisis' – a systematic crackdown on civil society that is fast becoming a defining feature of political spaces in numerous countries (Kiai, 2016). The phenomenon often described as the 'shrinking of civic spaces' is evidenced by a growing number of democratic governments imposing constraints that disrupt the operational and administrative frameworks of CSOs (Carothers, 2016; Aho and Grinde, 2017; Toepler et al, 2020). Numerous democracies have amended existing legal and policy frameworks or introduced new laws that complicate the stability of free civic spaces, thereby challenging the foundations of freedom and human agency (Clark, 2010; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019).

The literature on the shrinking space for civil society identifies a dual challenge concerning organisational and political legitimacy faced by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) operating in hostile political environments. The first set of challenges stem from diminishing legal and regulatory frameworks which, although designed to support civil society, may inadvertently undermine it if they are restrictive or poorly constructed (Hayman et al, 2014). Transnational civil society networks report a global reduction in civic freedoms, enforced by both state and non-state actors – including large corporations and armed groups – through stringent restrictions. These include the implementation of laws and regulations that limit civil group operations and the arbitrary arrests and detentions of activists and human rights defenders (Alliance, A.C.T., 2011; 2014; World Movement for Democracy and INCL, 2012; Civicus, 2013). The second set of challenges involves the shrinking political space for civil society dissent. The shifting perceptions of what behaviours are considered

legitimate require NGOs to continually adapt their mission, vision and operational frameworks to stay relevant. This has led to a discursive expansion of civil society, characterised by its pragmatic and adaptable nature in the face of restrictive political landscapes and the continual reshaping of its functional and philosophical propositions to survive (Banerjee, 2023; Crotty and Ljubownikow, 2024). Understanding these shifts is crucial for comprehending what makes some organisations less legitimate than others, thus rendering them more vulnerable to restrictions, and how organisations navigate and influence the shrinking civic spaces they inhabit, affecting their vulnerability to regulatory challenges.

The subsequent sections of this article will focus on the abilities and inabilities of INGOs in India to navigate these legitimacy challenges, with a particular emphasis on the ramifications of stringent regulatory and financial restrictions. The discussion elucidates the multifarious obstacles and prospects encountered by INGOs, impacting their operational scale in an evolving political landscape. This analysis begins with an exploration of organisational responses to the diverse degree of constraints faced by INGOs within the structural framework posed by the shrinking of civic spaces in India. It explores the multifaceted agency exhibited by the ten studied INGOs, highlighting their varied responses to regulatory restrictions and their adept utilisation of the structural context to maximise their legitimacy claims. The exploration is structured along two main dimensions: INGOs facing significant restrictions versus those maintaining operational stability with minimal or no restrictions. The findings emphasise that the political orientations of INGOs can significantly influence the severity of state-imposed restrictions, leading INGOs to face varying levels of constraints based on their political alignments with host state ideologies. This demonstrates how legitimacy is employed as a key proxy for imposing restrictions on organisations perceived as a threat to the government's own political legitimacy, highlighting the critical role that political congruence or divergence with state policies plays in determining the operational landscape for these organisations.

Shrinking spaces for civil society: the case of India

The recent surge in debates surrounding the shrinking civic space in consolidated democracies and the challenges to civil society legitimacy, particularly concerning INGOs, has sparked significant scholarly interest. Specifically, understanding how organisations establish legitimacy as active agents in international human rights affairs is closely linked to the development of manoeuvring strategies that ultimately dictate their survival and success (Carothers, 2016; Buyse, 2018). While the global crackdown against civil society is widely acknowledged across geopolitical scales, India presents a fascinating case study to explore the broader trajectories of shrinking spaces. With its burgeoning poverty, repressed civic space, and the banning of NGOs and INGOs, many of which are stripped of foreign funding on 'anti-national' and 'anti-developmental' charges, this article captures India's status as the world's largest democracy vis-à-vis the symptomatic restrictions faced by INGOs in these shrinking spaces. These organisations oftentimes confront a complex amalgamation of challenges that impinge upon their operational efficacy and long-term viability.

Amid global shifts influenced by neoliberal and neo-nationalist ideologies, India has witnessed a significant curtailment of civil and political rights (Bruff, 2014; Ismail and Kamat, 2018). Renowned scholars and global democracy indices have highlighted

the deterioration of Indian democracy (Varshney, 2014; Chowdhury and Keane, 2021; Alizada et al, 2021; Tudor, 2023), with thousands of civil society groups facing license cancellations, funding curbs and harassment of rights activists. The existing policy literature on the operating space for civil society in India argues that organisations that work on issues considered to be political, such as human rights and democracy promotion, tend to experience more significant restrictions than those engaged in charity and service-provision (Sahoo, 2020; Bethke and Wolff, 2023).

For INGOs, the challenges are particularly acute, and exacerbated by arbitrary categorisations and accusations of being 'foreign agents', significantly impacting their operational space and legitimacy (Christensen and Weinstein, 2013; Carothers and Brechenmacher, 2014). INGOs are increasingly challenged by 'anti-national' and 'anti-developmental' charges, and often accused of being propaganda machines for the resistance movement and abetting communal disharmony, given their interference in the domestic affairs of the state. This trend has complicated INGO legitimacy, prompting scrutiny of their identity, purpose and accountability. Following the contented turn, the Indian government has, under the guise of national security, enacted repressive legal frameworks and policy amendments targeting rights-based civil society organisations (Ganguly, 2015; Mohan, 2017). A confidential Indian Intelligence Bureau report, *Impact of NGOs on Development* (Bureau, 2014) accused internationally funded NGOs of harming the Indian GDP by 2–3 per cent annually. The consequence of this report has been severe, with numerous organisations facing blacklisting, revoked funding and operational bans. The analysis highlights the financial constraints intensified by the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Act (FCRA), which severely restricts access to essential international funds. The FCRA 2010, and its 2020 amendments, represent significant shifts in the regulatory landscape for NGOs in India, particularly impacting their financial and operational autonomy. It was originally enacted to regulate the inflow of foreign contributions to NGOs (Kumar, 2019) characterised as of a 'political nature' or acting against 'public interest', or against 'strategic, scientific or economic interest' or 'security' (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020), ostensibly to prevent foreign interference in domestic affairs. Since 2014, the Indian government has cancelled the FCRA licences of more than 20,000 NGOs (Bhattacharya, 2018), including high-profile organisations such as the Lawyers Collective, Greenpeace India, People's Watch, Compassion International and Public Health Foundation of India (Mohan, 2017). The grounds for these cancellations include 'non-compliance with reporting requirements' and activities deemed 'political' or against 'national interest' and 'economic security'. On 10 September 2020, India froze the accounts of Amnesty International India on the allegation that it had circumvented the FCRA (Amnesty International Canada, 2020). The action forced Amnesty International India to halt its operations in India.

While the government targets INGOs that work on all aspects of justice, democracy, rights and services, not all groups working on these issues encounter similar restrictions and pressures. This study endeavours to explore why this is the case, and how organisations establish and maintain legitimacy in such a constrained environment. Understanding these dynamics can provide insights for developing strategic responses and adaptive measures that enable INGOs to effectively navigate these evolving challenges.

Civil society legitimacy

The field of organisational studies has acknowledged that organisations cultivate distinct observable features, implicit rules and unspoken norms (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown and Lewis, 2011). These elements contribute to the development of a coherent identity that guides organisational actions and outcomes (Clarke et al, 2009; Creed et al, 2010; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Substantial research has gone into theorising the legitimacy of organisations, both NGOs (Atack, 1999; Edwards, 1999; Brown, 2001; 2020; Lister, 2003; Walton, 2008; 2013) and INGOs and transnational civil society networks (Brown, 2008; Walton et al, 2016). This extensive body of literature delves into how organisations interact with diverse external stakeholders, including beneficiaries, markets, and governmental bodies, to maintain stability, credibility and effectiveness (Burawoy, 2012; Brown, 1994; Clegg et al, 2007; Carroll and Jarvis, 2015). While 'old' institutional theorists have attributed a lot of emphasis on technical efficiency and performance outcomes of organisations that pursue their best interests, the 'new' institutionalism has drawn upon identifiable structures and practices that organisations adopt to legitimise their presence in any given institutional context (Lawrence and Buchanan, 2017). This includes acknowledging the coexistence of multiple logics that shape organisational (internal) systems, structures and schemas (Mayer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996). Organisations, in their pursuit of legitimacy, design and implement these logics, contributing to what is termed the 'paradox of embedded agency' (Holm, 1995) that ultimately guides their production of legitimacy.

In the field of organisation studies, the concept of legitimacy is often attributed to Suchman, who defines it as 'a general perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate' (Suchman, 1995). The extensive legitimacy scholarship refers to four key legitimacy types: regulatory (compliance with legal frameworks and regulatory requirements), pragmatic (representing the interests and needs of a particular constituency), normative (adhering to social norms and values), and cognitive (achieving a taken-for-granted status) (Lister, 2003; Brown, 2020). This article views legitimacy from a social constructivist viewpoint, contending that these different legitimacy typologies may sometimes conflict. Lister's work is particularly insightful in this regard, as she scrutinises the power dynamics inherent in the process of legitimisation by asking questions such as 'Which legitimacy matters?' and 'For whom?' (Lister, 2003). Lister proposes legitimacy as a mechanism through which diverse expressions of discourse shape organisational practices and activities. It posits legitimacy as an inherently political matter rather than a technical one. Building on the social constructivist approach to understanding legitimacy, this study recognises legitimacy as 'fundamentally contested' (Walton, 2008; Walton et al, 2016), mainly due to the conflicting interests of various stakeholders. This contention makes achieving universal legitimacy challenging and situates the processes of legitimation and delegitimation of organisations within a highly context-specific socio-political landscape. Therefore, legitimacy is both temporally bound and positional (Heideman, 2019), with organisations striving for multilateral accountability and catering to stakeholders with diverse and sometimes opposing legitimacy requirements. This dynamic makes legitimacy 'the product of an ongoing process of social negotiation involving multiple participants' (Suddaby et al, 2017). Therefore, understanding legitimacy as something organisations earn by being institutionalised and lose if they contradict institutional norms oversimplifies its complexity. Van der Borgh and Terwindt define civil society legitimacy

as 'the very opportunities and threats that organisations or individuals experience in a political context, as well as the ways they use those opportunities' (Van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014). They note that civil society legitimacy is 'not systematically repressed', and that some organisations are more vulnerable to legitimacy challenges than others (Popplewell, 2018). This article explores this link between legitimacy manifestation and the experience of restriction to develop a deeper understanding of what makes some organisations more vulnerable to restrictions than others and how they navigate their external environments vis-a-vis the political space to establish a sense of legitimacy, which is crucial for sustained functioning.

Data collection and analysis

This study employed purposive sampling of ten prominent INGOs with extensive bilateral and multilateral memberships to analyse their relationship with the government vis-à-vis their experience with restrictions. Restrictions in this context include organisations subjected to curtailed or ceased funding, judicially imposed bans (either full or partial), administrative crackdowns, and interventions in their internal functioning, as well as blocking or limiting access to resources, freezing bank accounts, and using the judicial-legal framework to undermine (naming and shaming) the organisations.

The selection of INGOs for this study was guided by a typology that categorises organisations according to their levels of engagement, operational modalities and experiences with direct restrictions. Within this framework, it was observed that, while some of the organisations are subject to direct restrictions, others have managed to maintain stable relationships with state and local authorities, thereby facilitating their compliance with and operation within the existing regulatory framework.

Data was gathered through ten interviews with the CEOs of each organisation, lasting 60–90 minutes on average, following a semi-structured format (Belina, 2023) that focused on gaining insights into the organisations' perceptions of their relationship with the government and the challenges of operating as an INGO in India. The choice of interviewing only the executive members or CEOs from each organisation centred on the potential vulnerability of grassroots activists who might lack the rights or leverage to divulge extensive information or, worse, unintentionally disclose sensitive details that should remain outside my possession. The transcribed data underwent systematic categorisation, labelling and coding using both manual methods and Nvivo software. Initially, the data was manually highlighted and annotated with preliminary codes. These codes were then refined and organised into broader categories using Nvivo that allowed extrapolation of the most significant themes and processes explaining INGOs' experience with regulatory restrictions that impose unprecedented challenges to the Indian non-profit sector today.

To maintain confidentiality and mitigate the risk of identity disclosure amid the sensitive political climate in India, the organisations and individual informants selected for this case study are not named. The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2022) (Approval document no. 2022–06059–01), adhering to ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent, voluntary participation and the right of informants to withhold information or withdraw at any time.

The following analysis will present and summarise information about the participating organisations' primary domains of action and engagement, their experiences with restrictions, and the efforts they undertook to navigate legitimacy challenges.

Exploring legitimacy challenges: why some organisations are more vulnerable to restriction than others

There is a widespread perception that civil society organisations engaged in advocacy or addressing sensitive political issues like human rights or democracy promotion are more vulnerable to restrictions than those involved in charity and service provision. This article investigates the validity of this perception and explores why not all groups addressing these issues face similar levels of restrictions and crackdowns. The ten INGOs under investigation represent a range of issues, including aid, advocacy, environmental protection and child welfare. Among these, five have experienced direct restrictions such as judicial bans, arbitrary interventions, restricted resource access, frozen bank accounts and other significant legal constraints undermining their work. The remaining five have relatively maintained stable relationships with the state and local authorities, allowing them to operate without substantial disruptions.

The following analysis details each organisation's unique experiences with restrictions and non-restrictions, as well as their responses to legitimacy challenges. This comprehensive exploration highlights the intensifying pressure on INGOs due to the shrinking of civic spaces and examines how these growing constraints affect the vibrancy and activism of the non-profit sector in India.

Organisations experiencing restrictions

This section provides an empirical examination of INGOs subjected to restrictions. Among the five organisations that experienced restrictions, three are prominent national-level actors in the fields of democracy and advocacy promotion (ORG 1), human rights (ORG 2), and environmental protection (ORG 3). The other two are notable charity and service organisations in public health (ORG 4) and humanitarian aid (ORG 5), also working at national levels.

Table 1 below summarises the key challenges and responses of organisations experiencing restrictions, highlighting the varied strategies employed to navigate these hurdles.

Table 1:

Organisation	Domain of action	Types of restrictions	Responses to legitimacy challenges
ORG 1	Human rights	Partial ban, FCRA restrictions	Reduced capacity, advocacy for legal reforms, resilience despite state pressure
ORG 2	Democracy advocacy	Full ban	International partnerships, underground advocacy
ORG 3	Environmental protection	Frozen bank accounts	Downsizing, localised campaigns, legal compliance strategies
ORG 4	Child welfare, public health	FCRA licence suspension	Criticism of perceived religious affiliations, building local support networks, engaging in low-profile activities
ORG 5	Humanitarian aid	Ban due to alleged religious conversion	Commitment to serving marginalised communities, collaboration with international NGOs, discreet operational tactics

Organisations advocating for democracy and human rights have encountered particularly severe challenges. For instance, ORG 2, promoting democratic ideals, was subject to a comprehensive ban, whereas ORG 1, which focuses on human rights advocacy, encountered a partial prohibition of operations. These examples emphasise the acute susceptibility of advocacy-based organisations to governmental impositions. Over the past decade, an escalating mistrust by the Indian government towards civil society initiatives, particularly those critiquing inequitable development projects and corporate practices, has become evident (Mohan, 2017). These concerns frequently intersect with broader discourses on rights, justice and grassroots mobilisation. Moreover, alongside arbitrary surveillance and scrutiny of civic spaces, the government has employed prohibitions, attributing these to a range of justifications from regulatory non-compliance to purported fund misallocation, thereby curtailing civil society operations and compromising their regulatory standing (Ganguly, 2015).
The CEO of ORG 1 attributes the targeting of their funding to their political activism, stating:

> The government sees us as an opponent, as what we advocate for comes out as very political, challenging their developmental agendas and the state-market nexus. With the more recent political, fiscal, and legal changes like the FCRA amendments, we are functioning at 10% of our capacity, and it is very clear that we have to shrink in size. The reduction of funds is now a tool to intimidate organisations and activists into submission. Despite this, our continued presence in the political scene, despite being targeted by the state and big businesses, gives us confidence and credibility to persevere.
>
> (Executive interview: ORG 1)

This sentiment is echoed by the executive of ORG 2, who described an atmosphere of fear within the civil society space, highlighting the government's strategy of discrediting opposition:

> There's almost a schizophrenic split between how India is portrayed as a democracy from the outside and its autocratic nature of governance on the inside. There's misuse of state power at every level. Anyone who challenges the government, anyone who brings in a different point of view, is considered an opponent. The very space for dissent is shrinking, not just in the civic space but also in media and academic institutions. We have no choice but to act and dare to act for the people. We cannot hide our heads in the sand and wait for the storm to pass.
>
> (Executive interview: ORG 2)

This approach highlights how the naming and shaming of INGOs has evolved into a strategic political tool wielded by the state to reward its allies while punishing its adversaries, normalising the administration of civil society. It not only undermines the operational capacity of these organisations but also signals broader challenges confronting the non-profit sector in maintaining a resilient stance against escalating governmental pressures. Prominent human rights organisations and activists seeking to hold the government accountable for various rights violations faced physical harassment and intimidation, amplifying the challenges confronting the non-profit sector today (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Yadav, 2023).

ORG 3, engaged in environmental protection, also faces similar restrictions, such as the freezing of its bank accounts. This has led to significant downsizing and restructuring due to financial constraints. The CEO, speaking about the impact of these restrictions on their campaigns, provided insights into their advocacy against ecological infringements:

> We vigorously campaigned to stop Western companies from using India as a dumping ground for toxic waste. We campaigned against coal mining and resisted the massive displacement of indigenous populations in India. We succeeded in all our campaigns mostly because we had the power of people by our side until the government froze our bank accounts. We fought back, and our fight is still on.
>
> (Executive interview: ORG 3)

When asked how the organisation intends to sustain its activities amid ongoing legal battles and maintain credibility, the respondent stated:

> The spread of right-wing populism has changed the advocacy and service equation. Our aid budgets are being threatened, and we face pushback from working on relief activities. At this point, the stakes are very high for us trying to practice activism, advocate for change, and negotiate strategies. We have stopped running most of our national-level campaigns and are instead doing things locally.
>
> (Executive interview: ORG 3)

While organisations involved in claim-making advocacy are more prone to restrictions, these factors alone do not fully explain why some organisations face greater pressure. This study identified two Catholic missionary organisations (ORG 4 and ORG 5). Despite their primary focus on providing aid, they faced unique challenges due to their religious affiliations. Faith-based organisations associated with the Catholic Church are increasingly viewed with scepticism by the Indian government, which harbours a critical and sometimes antagonistic stance towards these entities due to their perceived 'Catholic' affiliations, seen as incompatible within a Hindu-nationalist set-up. The executive leadership of ORG 5 elucidated the entrenched ideological tensions and vulnerabilities inherent in navigating a shrinking operational space. When asked about the impact of the ban on the organisation's operations in India, the respondent noted:

> I don't know of any other organisations with such a long service record among the destitute and poor as we do. If you want to create an impact, you pick icons. Then you target visible and revered icons; their shock value is far more significant, and there is nothing in India more prominent, trusted, and respected than we are. Targeting us on alleged religious conversion claims with no legal evidence to back them up is like sending a clear message that the space for exercising fundamental human rights is choking in a country that is still secular and allows people to propagate their religion. Cutting off funding sources ensures that those rights cannot be exercised.
>
> (Executive interview: ORG 5)

Another renowned Christian humanitarian organisation working on child welfare and public health issues faced similar legal restrictions when its FCRA licence was suspended (Roy, 2020), citing alleged receipt of funds for 'religious' purposes. The spokesperson for ORG 4 responded to the situation, expressing the view:

> We are not Western demons. We are not Christian terrorists trying to sabotage development works and the security of India. We are one of India's largest child-centred humanitarian organisations. We have reached out and impacted the lives of over 2.6 million children in India. The bigger issue in India and the world right now is too much greed, poverty of thoughts, and a lack of philosophy.
>
> (Executive interview: ORG 4).

These interviews offer a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced challenges faced by humanitarian organisations, especially those perceived as 'religious'.

Notably, organisations without explicit religious categorisation encounter fewer restrictions, revealing a complex dynamic within the regulatory landscape. Organisations with a charity and service-centric approach are generally less susceptible to restrictions. However, despite their commitment to aid and service-delivery provisions, the faith-based groups (ORG 4 and 5) were not immune to government scrutiny, highlighting the profound ideological tensions within the shrinking operational space. Conversely, organisations focused on rights advocacy and democracy promotion (ORG 1, 2, 3) possess varying degrees of legitimacy. Some of these groups provide essential support to indigenous communities and victims of rights violations by campaigning on their behalf. While these efforts have granted them a higher degree of pragmatic legitimacy among the communities they serve, they are not viewed favourably by governing authorities, who are often the targets of their advocacy efforts. Furthermore, their role as 'watchdogs', primarily holding the government to account, is widely recognised and supported globally, as well as by multilateral institutions and bilateral donors, which causes a 'boomerang effect' (Keck and Sikkink, 1999) by undermining their legitimacy in the eyes of the Indian government, which labels them as foreign agents. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for civil society and its actors to respond to national crisis and engage or influence policy in a restrictive political context.

Organisations maintaining operational stability

Organisations that did not experience restrictions tend to achieve regulatory legitimacy by aligning with the government's expectations of what civil society should be and do. These organisations derive legitimacy by providing high-quality services and assistance for diverse stakeholders, including state agencies and other for-profit corporations. They exhibit distinct characteristics that differentiate them from the groups that suffered severe restrictions. Firstly, they circumvent restrictions through proactive and diverse engagement with local authorities. Secondly, they adopt a rationalist and pragmatic approach to mobilise public opinion and garner support for their advocacy agenda. Thirdly, they adopt a less confrontational stance in their advocacy, fostering collaborative spaces with the government. These attributes

collectively contribute to these organisations' resilience, setting them apart from groups directly impacted by restrictions.

Table 2 summarises the key practices and insights from organisations maintaining operational stability, providing a detailed overview of the strategies employed to ensure continuity despite challenging conditions.

Table 2:

Organisation	Domain of action	Legitimacy practices	Key quotes from executives
ORG 6	Clean water initiatives	Evidence-supported advocacy, compliance with regulatory framework	'We gather data and present it to prevent government defensiveness.'
ORG 7	Sanitation and water access	Engaging at the local/state level, avoiding national campaigns	'We leverage the power of the people and maintain collaboration with stakeholders.'
ORG 8	Social justice	Soft diplomacy, donor influence	'We use "soft diplomacy" to subtly influence donors.'
ORG 9	Water and sanitation advocacy	Rationalist approach, diverse stakeholder engagement	'We believe in convincing rather than confronting.'
ORG 10	Women's and children's rights	Avoiding high-risk activism, capacity building within legal frameworks, maintaining transparency	'We lay low to avoid drawing attention from the government.'

The insights from five executive interviews reveal a nuanced and subjective understanding of rights within India' s challenging environment. The organisations that have remained unimpeded by direct constraints have opted for diplomatic and strategic approaches. As one executive member puts it: 'Our efforts are appreciated by the government and businesses alike precisely because we are scientifically grounded, and we excel at playing the game by the book. We have to work with them, so we can't alienate them if we want to bring any change' (Executive Interview: ORG 9). When discussing the advocacy component of their agenda, the respondent expressed reluctance towards using the term 'advocacy' and explained:

> Of course, we advocate for issues that we find relevant, but we use a different work for it. We believe in convincing rather than confronting. There are civil society groups for whom advocacy is central to their work. They go all out by publishing, speaking on several international platforms, and writing these memorandums attacking the government. They approach things differently. We meet the authorities in question, explain what's on our mind, and negotiate with them. Our meetings are often informal; we don't broadcast them.
>
> (Executive interview: ORG 9)

This approach highlights the complexity of building trust with stakeholders and how organisations demonstrate their capacity to deliver expected outcomes. The avoidance of the term 'advocacy' suggests a deliberate strategic choice, favouring a pragmatic and

cooperative rapport with the state rather than an adversarial stance. The respondent from another organisation, which managed to evade restrictions, emphasised the critical importance of advocacy grounded in evidence-based research:

> Human rights NGOs are often perceived by the government as entities that express opinions without substantial evidence. To counteract this perception, we have dedicated considerable resources to research, ensuring that our advocacy work is well-supported by evidence. This approach also serves as a strategic measure for our own security. By investing in research, we gather data and accurate information. Representing this information to the government prevents them from adopting a defensive stance.
>
> (Executive interview: ORG 6).

All five organisations that successfully avoided restrictions also proactively cultivated diverse capacities for constructive engagement with local authorities. In particular, ORG 7 shared their strategy for operating successfully under India' s sensitive political conditions:

> Given the sensitivity of the political condition in India, it is crucial not to engage in a national-level campaign because that catches the eye of the government. So, it's better to deal with the states and municipalities, engage at the local or state level, and try to find other ways to avoid national-level campaigns. International solidarities would not really work because if you are seeking international solidarity again, that means your interests are detrimental to the interests of the nations. You're labelled anti-national again.
>
> (Executive interview: ORG 7)

When asked about the strategies contributing to the organisation's ability to evade government crackdowns, the CEO of ORG 7 highlighted the advantages of fostering collaborations rooted in harnessing the power of local knowledge and community engagement:

> We leverage the power of the people, the communities we work with. NGOs involved in development politics often face significant challenges in their daily operations. Issues related to minor ties, indigenous people, or activities involving coal or mineral extraction and sensitive mining operations attract government and corporate attention. In contrast, we maintain a benign collaboration with the same stakeholders as we provide fresh water to the people. The government cannot afford not to work with us on this. If people don't have access to water, unrest is inevitable, which is detrimental to both the government and businesses.
>
> (Executive Interview: ORG 7)

ORG 10, a service-based organisation, also navigated through the complex landscape without attracting undue attention. The CEO explained their strategy for balancing service delivery with survival. When asked whether ORG 10 experienced a direct attack on its operations, the CEO remarked that they were not identified among the 'listed' civil society organisations deemed as potential threats by the government,

as outlined in the Indian Intelligence Bureau report (IR/IS no. 002). She took a critical standpoint while sharing her perspective on the collective failure of civil society organisations to maintain transparency: 'The image of civil society, for its part, has not been great as a collective. We haven't done a lot of self-regulation, so we have allowed bad practices to flourish, leaving the space for somebody to come in and regulate us' (Executive interview: ORG 10). She further emphasised the proactive measures her organisation has undertaken to evade drawing attention from the government:

> Sometimes, service delivery does not need to be devoid of social concerns, and we have demonstrated that. However, at the moment, it's not the time. We must lay low, and that's what we will do for the time being. For instance, working in child labour could be problematic. They would see child labour as an issue of rights and, therefore, a political matter. Today, any form of activism is a problem. It would attract attention, and it is absolutely up to individual organisations to assess how much risk they are willing to take.
>
> (Executive interview: ORG 10)

These interviews demonstrate how organisations navigate the complex interplay of advocacy, service delivery and government relations through strategic engagement and prioritisation of less politically sensitive issues.

While the government primarily targeted organisations focusing on democracy and rights, the degree of restrictions and pressures varies. For instance, ORG 8, which addresses rights-related issues, maintains higher organisational legitimacy with multiple stakeholders compared to its counterparts. The CEO attributed this to their strategy of employing 'soft diplomacy:

> Action and advocacy are integral to our work. While we address rights, it's crucial to prioritise whose rights matter. We focus on promoting women's and children's well-being, raising awareness with authorities and altering their perceptions. If the government feels challenged, it won't accept our claims and propositions. That's not our approach. Some argue that civil society must inherently oppose the government systematically, but that's just foolish!
>
> (Executive interview: ORG 8)

When asked about managing priorities and donor relationships, the respondent highlighted the influence of donor priorities but also outlined strategies for subtly influencing donor decisions:

> We have to take into account that India doesn't have a robust philanthropic culture. This makes civil society groups rely on foreign funds from foreign donors to carry out their work. So, the priority is set by the donor. If the donor says, 'This is where the money should go', we consider that. However, there are obvious ways of influencing the donor, directly or indirectly, to make a certain decision that fits our original action plan. We call it ' soft diplomacy', which is not too harsh, yet an effective way of communicating and using your highest selling point for negotiation.
>
> (Executive interview: ORG 8)

The interviews highlight the pragmatic and adaptive strategies employed by civil society actors in navigating the shrinking of civic space. It demonstrates how the use of bans/suspension, conditional or absolute, and various other regulatory restrictions has become a new weapon of subversion, leading to alternative approaches of recontextualisation, prioritisation and peripheralisation of the issues, planning and engagements as exhibited by this group of organisations. The narratives reflect concerns about a shrinking civic space, misuse of state power, and 'compromised advocacy' (Arvidson et al, 2018), with instances of harassment against human rights organisations and their activists having a confrontational claim-making position towards the governing authorities. Conversely, organisations facing fewer restrictions have demonstrated how civil society actors have had to adapt to survive through a higher degree of internal strategising and priority-setting towards issues perceived as less political by the state. Despite the adversities coming from the institutional contexts and issues, all five INGOs in this group have exhibited resilience by focusing on practices and processes that civil society actors could potentially shape or influence in the face of state pressure.

Conclusion

Organisational legitimacy is significantly influenced by organisational strategies and behaviours. This observation aligns with the broader understanding that legitimacy encompasses a range of attributes such as functional tendencies, behavioural patterns, culture and values. Confrontational strategies and behaviours potentially undermine perceptions of legitimacy among some constituencies, making organisations that employ them more likely to face restrictions. However, when considered in isolation, these factors do not fully explain why one organisation faces severe restrictions while another does not.

Organisations perceived as less threatening by authorities generally enjoy higher organisational legitimacy compared to their counterparts addressing similar rights and justice issues. For instance, organisations focused on charity and service provision (ORG 10) exhibited resilience through adherence to normative legitimacy, grounded in their service-oriented activities, dedication to moral principles and altruistic missions. Conversely, organisations affiliated with 'Catholicism' (ORG 4 and 5) faced challenges due to their religious identity, viewed as contentious within an emerging Hindu-nationalist state, despite engaging in service delivery and upholding similar moral standards. Water and sanitation organisations (ORG 6, 7, 9), characterised by pragmatic approaches, achieved notable success in environmental conservation and securing water rights, yielding generally positive legitimacy outcomes. In contrast, ORG 3, focused on environmental protection, faced severe repercussions for opposing the state's development agenda. Similarly, organisations (ORG 1 and 2) advocating democracy, social justice and human rights played crucial roles in engaging stakeholders and shaping public policy, yet they also faced significant scrutiny and challenges. While one organisation (ORG 8) successfully adjusted its strategies to align with governmental expectations and mitigate restrictions, others struggled to maintain their advocacy roles amid growing pressures.

The findings highlight that differences in the experience of restrictions are not merely incidental, but are systematically influenced by states' perceptions of

INGOs' political stances. Governments may strategically seek to undermine the legitimacy and political space of organisations they view as threats to their own political legitimacy. Walton (2013) suggests that processes of legitimation and delegitimisation are often linked to broader struggles for political legitimacy. In contexts where the political legitimacy of government elites is contested, INGOs may be perceived as threats to power and authority. The Indian government has employed tactics such as stigmatisation, suspension of activities, anti-civil society narratives, and shadow organisations to delegitimise and hinder civil society organisations perceived as threats. The organisations targeted by the Indian authorities have garnered significant international support from the human rights community, multilateral institutions and bilateral stakeholders, which validates their role as legitimate defenders of rights globally. This international recognition, while it boosts their global credibility, further complicates their organisational legitimacy in the eyes of the government. The Indian government often views such foreign support as interference in domestic affairs, or as an alignment of these organisations with foreign agendas contrary to national policies, leading to increased scrutiny and regulatory challenges for these organisations within India. Therefore, while maintaining international connections can provide a safety net of global support that can be crucial, especially in situations where local conditions become hostile, it necessitates a nuanced and tactful approach domestically to ensure that such support does not inadvertently compromise their local legitimacy and effectiveness.

To better comprehend how legitimacy is used as a key proxy to impose restrictions on civil society, it is crucial to recognise that the government tends to target organisations that it perceives as threats to its own political legitimacy, authority and ideology, while those adopting less confrontational approaches often succeed in building robust organisational legitimacy. The extent to which these legitimacy practices can function as a tool to create and maintain an enabling environment for civil society always depends on the context at hand. Practices of legitimacy will inevitably take on different forms in different places, but there may be resonance in the ways in which the political can be conceptualised so as to address the challenges posed by shrinking spaces. However, establishing and enhancing organisational legitimacy is intricate and time-consuming, influenced by various factors beyond a singular criterion. Therefore, in navigating the intricate landscape of compromised democracies like India, civil society organisations must comprehensively understand the nuances of legitimacy manifestation to fully comprehend what types of rights and associated claims are possible in India's complex political climate. Such insights can inform actions and practices, illuminating how organisations can effectively navigate the evolving challenges of shrinking civic spaces.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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