

CBI registers case against Tamil Nadu NGO under FCRA

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The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has registered a case against Madurai-based Centre for Promotion of Social Concerns (CPSC) under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 1976.

The move comes at a time when the Union Ministry of Home Affairs has refused to renew the FCRA registration of nearly 6,000 non-governmental organisations in the country, including many run by minorities.

CPSC was founded by well-known human rights activist Henri Tiphagne. It runs a programme unit called 'People's Watch'.

Based on a complaint dated July 22, 2014, by the then director in the ministry, AK Sinha, the economic wing of the CBI has booked the organisation for FCRA violations.

The ministry conducted two inspections: in 2012 (for the period between 2006-2007 and 2010-2011), and in 2014 (between 2011-2012 to 2012-2013). During the inspections, it was found that CPSC had withdrawn ₹28 lakh in July 2012 after the suspension of FCRA accounts of the organisation. The complaint has also alleged that there is a lack of bills for ₹1.69 crore, which was withdrawn between 2008-2009 and May 2012.

The complaint added that People's Watch was acting like a separate entity and most of the vouchers and bills were in the name of the programme unit. An FIR was also filed based on these charges and a search was carried in the organisation on January 8.

The news has created a furore among the human rights activists, since People's Watch is known for taking on issues such as custodial deaths, caste atrocities and extrajudicial killings.

On January 9 Tiphagne released a video statement. He said: "The Union government believes that by intimidating us in these ways, we, the human rights workers, can be silenced.

"The CPSC was founded in 1981 and from 1982, we are giving proper records to the government. No rules have been violated. In 1995, People's Watch started. From 2010, even

before the FCRA amendment came into existence, our accounts were properly audited and shown to the committee of concerned citizens. These are the people in Madurai who are working with a cause towards the society. Then, we also followed this tradition in Chennai, where former bureaucrats would look into our books.”

“In 2012, for the first time the ministry searched our offices in May. In July, they suspended our FCRA account. According to the law, the account can be suspended only for 180 days. But they extended their suspension on 179th day. This was repeated two more times. So for more than one-and-a-half years our account was suspended,” Tiphagne added.

Towards the end of the first suspension, the ministry came out with 21 observations and said they were extending the suspension for the second time, so that the NGO would have sufficient time to answer for those observations, he said. In 2014, the organisation got back its accounts and again in 2016, its FCRA renewal was rejected. It was revoked in 2017.

“In 2016, we filed a plea against suspension of our accounts with the National Human Rights Commission. Responding to the plea, the ministry in its reply, Para 5, said that it has submitted reports on human rights violations to the United Nations, working hand in hand with its special rapporteurs. They also added that we should be prevented from working with embassies. By this, it is obvious that the ministry’s problem is not about the money we are getting but the work we do. If they try to use such activities and think they can stop us, it would be wrong,” added Tiphagne.

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