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Uncle Sam may be indirectly funding religious conversion in India

*Rupa Subramanya*

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*Are church and state really separate in the United States?*

*And how does that affect US foreign relations with countries such as India?*

An unsettled and ongoing debate in the area of foreign development assistance concerns the extensive role played by *faith-based organizations (FBO)*.

In the US context, in particular, FBOs have been heavily involved in the delivery of both domestic social and foreign development assistance activities funded by the US government.

On the foreign front in particular, the involvement of FBOs is seen by its proponents as a projection of US soft power in the area of foreign policy.

Despite uncertainty about whether it is even constitutional, given the US First Amendment's "establishment clause" separating church and state, FBOs have played an important role, starting during the administration of President Bill Clinton, carrying through that of George W Bush in a significant way and continuing into that of Barack Obama.

One of the principal avenues through which FBOs receive taxpayer support is the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Indeed, several major US-based FBOs, which receive USAID funds, are active in India in a big way.

An obvious concern is that when explicitly religious organizations are funded by tax dollars, what happens if those organizations are tempted to use the funds for proselytizing activity rather than just the intended humanitarian or charitable purpose?

In theory, this is not supposed to be an issue.

USAID has strict [rules](#) which prohibit FBOs from using government funds to engage in proselytizing or other explicit religious activities. *But this is problematic for at least two reasons.*

*First*, nothing prevents an FBO from quickly transitioning from a humanitarian activity such as disaster relief to evangelizing to the same group of people — and such activity is widely reported.

*Second*, as monies are fungible, the fact that FBOs receive government support means that they can transfer money away from humanitarian activity toward proselytizing, and still come out ahead financially.

*In Africa*, American evangelical Christian groups (some funded by the US government, others not) [have brought not just humanitarian](#) assistance and a proselytizing mission, but have an explicit agenda to promote socially conservative values, such as opposition to abortion and homosexuality.

*Here in India*, [Human Life International](#), a far right Catholic group that is against a woman's right to choose and is widely seen as anti-Semitic and homophobic has established a center in Goa, which was [inaugurated](#) in 2011 and praised to the hilt by former Congress minister Eduardo Faleiro.

One of the most important and controversial American evangelical organizations active in Africa and India and which receives [substantial](#) US government support is [Samaritan's Purse](#).

Headed by the influential evangelical leader Franklin Graham, the son of Billy Graham, the organization has received support from both Republican and Democratic presidents — despite their support for anti-homosexual and anti-abortion rights around the world.

*Franklin Graham also said made no secret of his disdain for other religions.*

After visiting India as a young person, he spoke of "*hundreds of millions of people locked in the darkness of Hinduism... bound by Satan's power*".

Samaritan's Purse has also encountered controversy with "*Operation Christmas Child*", which is active in India and elsewhere.

The program gives shoebox gifts, packaged in the US and other western countries by donors and distributed to needy children in the developing world. These boxes contain toys, clothes and other accessories and are accompanied by bibles and invitation to learn the Gospel and the Christian faith.

*Samaritan's Purse's own promotional video shows young children in India being presented with gifts, starting to attend church as a result, and then converting to Christianity.*

*As Samaritan's Purse's shoebox gifts makes clear, proselytization takes many forms and is an increasingly sophisticated and savvy enterprise. It's much more than the traditional modus operandi of a missionary going to a backward community with a loaf of bread in one hand and a bible in the other.*

Take *Partners Worldwide*, another recipient of US government money which is active in India through an Indian NGO, Business Seva.

They're a Christian network devoted to a "business as mission" (BAM) model, which sees business activity not just as profit-making but as an avenue for evangelizing.

One of their success stories in India is *Olive Technology*, an IT company based in the southern city of Hyderabad.

The company offers bible lessons and other support services for their Christian employees and provides IT support to other Christian missionary organizations.

The company's founder suggests that Christians ought to be "overt and zealous" in the public expression of their faith, with the BAM model being one avenue for doing this.

*While the opacity of funding arrangements would make it difficult or impossible to prove that US taxpayer money has directly supported evangelical activity, it's hard to escape the conclusion that US-funded FBOs such as Samaritan's Purse and Partners Worldwide are heavily*

*proselytizing in India, quite apart from whatever humanitarian or charitable work they may be doing.*

*And this is leaving aside all of the non-government funded US-based evangelical organizations active in India, which don't even have to maintain the presence of separating humanitarian from evangelical work.*

This sort of activity, blending charity and Christian evangelism, has aroused the concern of the Indian government.

*"Can social service not be performed without resorting to conversion and will any country allow changes to its demographic character?"* [asked India's Home Minister Rajnath Singh](#) recently while addressing a government commission charged with protecting the rights of minorities in India.

As it happens, such concerns are not new.

Because of India's history of almost two centuries of British colonial rule, Christian missionaries have been extremely active in the sub-continent long before independence in 1947.

Indeed, Mahatma Gandhi himself [expressed](#) a similar sentiment before India's independence, when he said, *"I hold that proselytizing under the cloak of humanitarian work, is to say the least, unhealthy. It is most certainly resented by the people here."*

Quite apart from the distaste that people may feel for proselytization piggybacking on top of humanitarian work is the very India-specific issue that the country's majority religion, Hinduism, is along with Judaism, the world's only major non- proselytizing religion, which creates an [un-level](#) playing field when confronted with aggressively proselytizing faiths such as Christianity and Islam.

That, in turn, has fuelled a debate on whether the central government ought to pass legislation to restrict conversion (some Indian states already do).

Indeed, concerns about Christian proselytization have recently flared up in neighboring Nepal, which until recently was a Hindu kingdom in which conversion was not allowed.

*After a secular constitution came in 2007, there was an influx of Christian missionaries and [apparently](#) a sharp rise in the Christian population, provoking a*

backlash from the majority Hindu, Buddhist and Kiranta (a blend of animism, Hinduism and Buddhism) communities.

*At present, the backlash against widespread Christian proselytization in places like Nepal and India is largely localized, but one cannot rule out the prospect of a serious blowback on the United States.*

Advocates of the use of FBOs as soft power tools of US foreign policy, such as President Obama and various scholars, have stressed that FBOs with ties to local religious organizations may be less intrusive than official US government intervention as administered directly by USAID. But this misses the fact that US FBOs active in India and elsewhere carry considerable baggage, namely the evangelical mission itself, which in reality is their self-proclaimed *raison d'être*.

The Indian experience with FBOs such as Samaritan's Purse and Partners Worldwide, to name just two discussed here, suggests strongly that the next US president, whichever party he or she may belong to, ought to seriously reconsider the way that the US government supports FBOs working overseas.

Despite being couched as support for FBOs broadly, the reality is that under Presidents Bush and Obama, this has really meant supporting Christian organizations to the exclusion of almost all others.

According to [Lee Marsden](#), a professor of international relations at the University of East Anglia in the UK, and a critic of the role of FBOs in US foreign policy, the first five years of the Bush presidency saw only two out of 159 major grants to FBOs being awarded to Muslim organizations, despite the large number of projects being undertaken during this period in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Marsden [documents](#) that this trend has continued into the Obama administration, with very few US-based Muslim organizations receiving any USAID funding.

Marsden's research corroborates a yearlong Boston Globe [investigation](#) which found that USAID grants heavily [favoured](#) evangelical groups engaged in proselytization overseas.

*This is to say nothing of Hindu, Buddhist or other non-Christian FBOs which simply aren't in the picture.*

If the US government doesn't act to change its policy stance, there may well be a policy reaction by the current Indian government of Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#).

The government has already put under the scanner foreign funds flowing into environmental NGOs which it believes are detrimental to the country's economic development. If dissatisfaction with large foreign funds supporting large-scale Christian proselytization continues to grow, it's conceivable that the Indian government may restrict or at least scrutinize such inflows as well.

It's noteworthy that the [principal concern](#) of one US-based Christian charity, [Christian Mission Aid](#), which funnels money into India for proselytization, is not the alleged persecution of the Christian minority in India *but rather the concern that the flow of foreign funds into India might stop and therefore jeopardize their evangelical mission.*

Either way, it seems unlikely that the status quo is sustainable, and irrespective of what countries such as India do, it's in the US national interest to revisit the use of FBOs as a tool of foreign and development policy.

Going forward, either grants to FBOs should be genuinely inclusive, and widely engage non-Christian FBOs, or the next administration should seriously consider turning the clock back to the days in which the makers of US foreign policy and development assistance took seriously the First Amendment.

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