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## 'GDP means Green Domestic Product'

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*The Congress Party's former brand manager's new ministerial office is decorated with lots of green plants and Thanjavur paintings. A bright blue kingfisher replica is perched on his window sill. Coffee table books on glaciers, Brazil and forests add even more colour as **Jairam Ramesh**, minister of environment and forests, switches on his laptop, preparing to answer questions from **Narayani Ganesh** :*

### Has India diluted its position on climate change?

I don't think so. Our position is very clear. We will not take on legally binding emissions reductions targets. We won't get into it because our per capita emissions are low. We have eight points that are non-negotiable as far as India is concerned. Take per capita emissions, for instance. It's not an Indian invention; it is an accepted equity principle based on common but differentiated responsibility within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

There is a policy formulation to see that the overall temperature rise is less than two degrees Celsius. The fact is that China, Brazil and South Africa were ready to go along with this formulation but there is no quantitative figure on how to achieve this. The Major Economies Forum (MEF) declaration does not specify any quantitative figure for global emissions reductions. India safeguards its basic critical position.

The way we see the declaration, the entire declaration is subject to the overall, overarching principle of common but differentiated responsibility; that's the scaffolding - it is receptive to capabilities as well as consistent with the principle of equity. Hence, India continues to lay emphasis on per capita emissions. I think too much is being made of the MEF declaration. The two-degree goal is new but no quantitative figures have been given. Anyhow, the negotiations will take place within the UNFCCC and we are not re-negotiating what the UNFCCC had agreed to in principle. We are only talking about the future road map once the Kyoto Protocol comes to an end.

### What is happening with the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC)?

The ministry of environment and forests coordinates its implementation with all central and state ministries. For India, adaptation measures are more fundamental than mitigation, though we are looking at both. For all this, technology is going to be critical.

We're organizing a Climate Change and Technology Conference in the capital during October 22-23 with 190 countries participating. This will be one of our contributions to Copenhagen. In critical areas we need to get more funding and we would like Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects to continue as we have benefited greatly from them.

GDP does not mean gross domestic product; it means green domestic product. Unless we start to think of green economic growth, our growth will not be sustainable. We are working with BRIC countries. Thirty-seven developing countries including India and Pakistan made a common proposal at Bonn. We asked developed countries to reduce their emissions by 40 per cent of 1990 levels by the year 2020.

### Would India agree to have its climate change projects monitored?

That's totally unacceptable. Where we are getting international finance and technology, we can certainly consider a role for monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV). That's reasonable. But MRV is certainly not OK for our National Action Plan.

### How are you fast-tracking environmental clearances?

There are two things. Cabinet approval is awaited for a national green tribunal with regional benches to deal with environment and forest, and water related civil issues. This is one of the Law Commission's recommendations. Secondly, a blueprint is ready for setting up US-type National Environmental Protection Authority with state level bodies as well, and these will evolve out of the current national and state pollution control boards, eventually replacing them. We're trying to get the first one done in this session (of Parliament) itself, before August 7.

### After Copenhagen, what?

We're setting up a Global Advisory Network Group on Environmental Science (GANGES), to set up an IPCC-style body in India. It will have Indian scientists living in US, Canada and other countries putting their heads together to research climate change related issues and their relevance to India. We won't have to wait for an expert abroad to inform us that Himalayan glaciers are melting. We'll get the best brains for research and capacity building. The group will have nothing to do with negotiations but will provide technical and knowledge support.

### How would you ensure that the Forest Rights Act and the Forest Conservation Act don't end up as a 'people versus environment' issue?

The Forest Rights Act is a reality; Parliament has passed it. Various state governments are giving out pattas. The rights-to-the-forest controversy is over. My task now is to see how best, in an ecologically sustainable manner, the provisions of the Forest Rights Act 2006 are reflected in the clearances given. In the case of bauxite mining in Nyamgiri, Orissa, for example, had we followed the process as laid down by the Forest Rights Act 2006, maybe clearances would not have been given. Pure conservationists fear that the Forest Rights Act and the Forest Conservation Act are incompatible.

On July 24 we're holding consultations with the "tigerwallahs" and the "tribalwallahs". We have to bring harmony between them in an ecologically sustainable manner. I hope that in the next few weeks we work out something tangible. We must reflect consultative processes in the local communities and implement the Rights Act and Conservation Act in a complementary way. When we give clearances under the Forest Conservation Act we don't consult local communities (the provision is contained in the Forest Rights Act). There are areas where the FRA can help actually in ecology preservation. It's a big challenge.

### How important is tiger conservation?

The tiger is only a symbol of the ecosystem. We might have some 1300 tigers left but do you know that of the total forest area we have, eight to nine per cent is tiger habitat, including core and buffer areas? If the tiger goes, these go, too. As for forest dwellers, upwards of 200 million people depend on the forest for their livelihoods. That's why there may be conflict situations. The biggest problem is that of mindsets - of both conservationists and rights activists. The key word here ought to be: harmony. We need to see the big picture. It is not just tiger, tiger, burning bright. It's ecosystem, ecosystem, burning bright!

I went to the Corbett area recently and was shocked to learn that there had been a proposal to locate the capital of Uttarakhand here! The tiger represents the forest area; the snow leopard represents the mountain area, and the cheetah represents the grasslands area.

**Shouldn't we save the tiger first before reviving cheetahs?**

It's an idea, not something that's going to be implemented right away! The cheetah is the only mammal to go extinct in the last 1000 years! As I said, these animals are symbols; they are representatives of the ecosystem. In September, at Gajner, Bikaner, we've called for consultations with international experts including Indian experts like M K Ranjit Singh and Divya Bhanu Singh Chawla. It will be a technical workshop with cheetah experts. They will look into questions like whether it is better to bring in Asiatic or African cheetah to be bred here in captivity. The question however remains: Where to release them? We're just trying to bring in experts and look at the question dispassionately. After all, the cheetah was indigenous to India. The name is from the Sanskrit, meaning 'spots'. It has to be a step-by-step, measured process.

**What about unglamorous but equally important species like frogs?**

Pranab Mukherjee has allotted 15 crore (in this budget) each to the Botanical Survey of India (est. 1866) and the Zoological Survey of India (est. 1916), for modernization and renewal. A high level committee is being set up to help revive these two organizations that research various environmental constituents including frogs and insects.

**Is India planning something special to mark Darwin's bicentenary and the 150th year of the publication of the Origin of the Species?**

On November 15 and 16 we will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Silent Valley, something that is probably more relevant here than Darwin's anniversary. A commemorative postage stamp will be released. SV will be declared a national park. We have two symbols - Project Tiger and Silent Valley, both initiated by Indira Gandhi, a great conservationist. We need to recapture the momentum created by both Indira and Rajiv Gandhi. The entire institutional framework to facilitate environmental management was set up by Indira Gandhi.

**Are you going to incentivise preservation of existing forests?**

Brazil has been leading the discussions on how to give incentives to reduce deforestation, that is, to prevent existing forests from being cut down. India has been leading the discussions on giving incentives to accelerate afforestation and reforestation. In fact we have submitted a project proposal to the UNFCCC on sustainable forest management.

On July 10, the Supreme Court broke a seven-year deadlock by bringing in the Compensatory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA). For seven years, some Rs 11,000 crore was lying unutilized. It was penalty money collected by governments for any project that diverted forest areas for non-forest purposes. Now it will be used for protection and regeneration of forest areas.

Between 1950 and 1980, before the Forest Conservation Act, India was losing 140,000 hectares to non-forest use. After the Act, between 1980 and 2008, the loss has been 25,000 hectares. The rate of deforestation has come down. India has a forest cover of 21 per cent. Of this, 13 per cent is of good or medium quality. Eight per cent are degraded land and CAMPA will be used to upgrade them. So we have a huge potential for carbon capture. And we're trying to regenerate deforested areas to return what was lost, and not filling them up with cheap substitutes.

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