

## Jairam Ramesh



Led by the Minister Jairam Ramesh, controversies and wide media attention seem inherent to the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), Government of India. This interview is based on a meeting with the Minister on 27 November 2010.

*How do you think your ministry can go about taking decisions without having an unbroken chain of controversies?*

Controversy is part of the DNA of our ministry. If it is non-controversial then it would imply that the ministry is not doing its job, because controversy is inherent to the nature of the mandate of the ministry, which is, to implement the laws that Parliament has passed – the Forest Conservation Act (1980), the Environment Protection Act (1986), the Coastal Regulation Zone Notification (1991), Forest Rights Act (2006) – and various other laws which have been passed and executive orders that have been issued, flowing out of the Environment Protection Act. So if we are serious about these laws, which we are, then controversy is inevitable.

The issues that we are dealing with, for instance *Bt* brinjal, are controversial issues; there was a scientific view, within the scientific community there were different views and civil society had a different view. So, it was controversial. If I had said yes to *Bt* brinjal, the civil society would have jumped on me.

*Because you mentioned *Bt* brinjal, we would like to know the way forward for genetically modified food crops in India...*

Biotechnology (or genetic engineering) is an important tool for raising productiv-

ity. Land is limited; we cannot bring new land under cultivation and in fact land under cultivation may come down; productivity increase is the only way. We have a serious climate change challenge; biotechnology is one important way of dealing with this. But at the same time we have to address larger issues that I had brought out in my *Bt* brinjal report of 9 February 2010. There are issues of safety, acceptability and seed control (if 90% of the GM seed is going to be controlled by one company, it is not conducive to equity). We have to deal with all these issues.

I am a firm believer that there must be a strong public investment in agricultural biotechnology. Health and industries are a somewhat different footing, but in the case of agriculture India must make a major public investment through publicly funded research institutes. Ronald Reagan's favourite phrase was that Green Revolution was made possible because of the magic of the market place, but he was profoundly mistaken; it was not the magic of the market place, it was the power of public investment (including publicly funded laboratories, the International Rice Research Institute, and the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre (CIMMYT) in Mexico). Norman Borlaug was not working for a private foundation or company. We should not close any technology options, but to think that one technology is a panacea for all our ills is unrealistic.

*Now that you have imposed a moratorium on the first GM food crop, what is in store for the other food crops that are being tested?*

They are going through the field tests. I had many concerns and those concerns have been fully accommodated. We cannot close the door to biotechnology in agriculture. But I am in favour of a prudent, cautious and step-by-step approach. I am not gung-ho on biotechnology. For the *Bt* brinjal decision, I got wide support from within the scientific community, from many scientists, including those in the Government. The fact is that these are issues in which there are differing opinions.

*But while joining the ministry in a press conference you sounded scepti-*

*cal about *Bt* food crops. So, seems like it was your personal bias that led to the moratorium to be imposed...*

I said that one cannot deal with *Bt* cotton and *Bt* brinjal in the same way. I also remember having said that I will be a little cautious about *Bt* brinjal. I had a personal bias, but I listened to everybody. I had seven public consultations in seven different cities of India. Over 8000 people attended these consultations. I listened to all points of view. I don't think there has been a more open and consultative process in decision-making as in the case of *Bt* brinjal. I had my own worry to begin with. I would be dishonest to say that I had no bias; I was a bit worried about the fact that it was a food crop. It was remarkable that every State Government opposed it; even a state like Gujarat that has had the most successful experience with *Bt* cotton said, 'let's be careful' as far as *Bt* brinjal is concerned. If the overwhelming view of the scientists and the states was to go ahead, I would have swallowed my biases and gone ahead.

*Your comment on the Inter-Academy Panel Report on *Bt* brinjal...*

I have nothing against the Academies and I have a lot of regard and respect for Dr Vijayan and others. But scientists should remain scientists, they shouldn't become evangelists. This is what happened in the climate change controversy. IPCC, instead of remaining a scientific body, became a climate advocacy. It became a climate evangelical body and overstepped the line of authority.

*What difference does it make changing the name of Genetic Engineering 'Approval' Committee to 'Appraisal' Committee?*

The functioning is going to be the same; everything is now going to be a part of the Biotechnology Regulatory Authority. The idea was to convey the impression that the job of a scientific body is appraisal. People give recommendations but ultimately I have to defend the decision, politically; I have to get up in the Parliament and defend why we are or not giving permission to *Bt* brinjal. That's the system we are in.

Scientists are notorious when it comes to public communication and they look down upon ordinary human beings; they look down upon larger sections of society. In my public consultations I found that the civil society was intolerant of views any other than theirs, but scientists are equally arrogant when it comes to dealing with the public. That issue is now settled because there will be the Biotechnology Regulatory Authority, which would oversee all the scientific aspects of the assessments and appraisals.

*How do you think we can strike a balance between development and safeguarding biodiversity?*

Striking a balance is absolutely essential. We have to avoid fundamentalism on both sides; there are growth fundamentalists and eco-fundamentalists. We have to discover a middle path. In my Satish Dhawan Memorial Lecture (see Box 1) I have discussed practical ways of finding this middle path. Navi Mumbai airport is a concrete example of this and about 80% of our environmental concerns were met. Sometimes one cannot find a middle path and need to deny clearance, but in most of the cases it is possible to find one.

*Your comment on the IPBES (Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services)...*

We are supporting this initiative. India is also the incoming President of COP-11, which will be held in India in October 2012. We have offered to be the first country for the TEEB (The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity) country study. TEEB is the global study of economics of biodiversity and ecology. We have offered for the study to be conducted in India. Indian scientists and economists will also be involved. So, I think we have to take a leadership role in biodiversity. In my Satish Dhawan Memorial Lecture, I mentioned that this study 'will demonstrate why prosperity and poverty reduction depends on maintaining the flow of benefits from ecosystems and why biodiversity conservation and protection is not a luxury but, in fact, is essential for achieving development objectives...'

*How is it that the projects (hydro-power, mining, etc.) with potential environmental hazards, catching*

*public attention do not get immediate clearance, whereas those with flawed Environment Impact Assessments, and going unnoticed by the public, get through soon?*

About 95% of the projects get environmental clearance and 85% get forestry clearance. It is only a couple of high-profile projects that get stuck because large forest areas are involved or large-scale impact on wildlife sanctuaries is involved, or there are other issues like tribal rights as in the case of Vedanta. So, 95% of the projects that come to our ministry get the environmental clearance under normal circumstances. Dog eating man is not news, but man eating dog is news. Giving environmental clearance is not news, but not giving environmental clearance becomes headline news.

*There seems like a clash between the responsibilities of a Minister of State for Power, which you were earlier*

*and a Minister of State for Environment and Forests, which you are. How do you fit in two clashing roles, of for instance, initially favouring hydroelectric projects and later opposing them?*

There is a clash and it will be foolish not to recognize that there are concerns. In some instances, we had to cancel projects considering environmental clearance issues. When I was in the Ministry of State for Power from April 2008 to February 2009, I tried getting NTPC, NHPC and other companies to be more sensitive to environmental concerns.

When I came to MoEF, I found that people were genuine, whether they were in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Uttarakhand or Himachal Pradesh; there are issues relating to submergence, resettlement and rehabilitation, etc. So people are worried about big dam projects and as the Minister for Environment and Forests what is my job? It is not to

#### Box 1. Environment versus development – striking a balance?

On 28 September 2010, Jairam Ramesh, delivered the 11th ISRO–JNCASR Satish Dhawan Memorial Lecture titled, 'The two cultures revisited: some reflections on the environment–development debate in India'. He talked about the 'two cultures' syndrome – 'the apparent gap between those espousing the case for faster economic growth and those calling for greater attention to protection of the environment'. According to Ramesh the two groups do not talk 'to' each other, but 'at' each other. The gap between the two seems to be widening. 'A balance must indeed be struck', between GDP growth and environment, and this is in agreement with both the groups. The reality is 'that there is undoubtedly a trade-off between growth and environment...', says Ramesh.

Ramesh wonders if the debate is 'really environment versus development or is it one of adhering to rules, regulations and laws versus taking the rules, regulations and laws for granted'. He exemplifies, 'When a power plant wants to draw water from a protected area or when a coal mine wants to undertake mining in the buffer zone of a tiger sanctuary, both in contravention of existing laws, it is not a "environment versus development" question but simply one of whether laws will be adhered to or not.'

'Even as India scales new heights of economic growth, it cannot afford to do so at the cost of the health of its population, its greatest asset.... If environmental control is seen, managed and sold as a public health enhancing intervention, then I would argue that much of this cacophony over "environment versus development" would subside.' In this light, Ramesh has taken an initiative to bring his ministry (MoEF) into a partnership with ICMR and Public Health Foundation of India.

'India desperately needs to sustain a high growth trajectory for at least two–three decades. This is absolutely essential for meeting our pressing social objectives ... At the same time, the "growth first at all costs and environment later" approach is clearly unacceptable. India needs to press into its development all that modern science and technology has to offer,' says Ramesh.

## INCCA – Indian Network for Climate Change Assessment.

Jairam Ramesh, in a conference organized by his ministry for the preparation of a Comprehensive Climate Change Assessment, announced the establishment of INCCA on 14 October 2009. INCCA is a network-based scientific programme of the MoEF. Ramesh says that the idea behind INCCA 'is to create a large consortium of Indian scientists who are going to take up the intellectual challenge of looking at climate change'. 'It consists of more than 250 scientists drawn from about 125 research institutions from across the country. They are working on climate change, looking at various alternative issues – impact assessments, the Green House Gas Inventory Programme, and regional assessment. Now they are looking at sub-regional assessments and agro-climatic zones.'

In November 2010, INCCA came out with a report 'Climate change and India: A 4 × 4 assessment – A sectoral and regional analysis for 2030s'. It is an assessment of the impact of climate change in the 2030s and is referred to as a 4 × 4 assessment because it covers four key sectors (agriculture, forests, health and water) in four eco-sensitive regions of the country (the Himalayan region, the Western Ghats, northeastern region and coastal region).

Some initiatives of the Ministry of Environment and Forests led by Jairam Ramesh.

In 2010, 'Project Cheetah' was approved by the MoEF to introduce the extinct animal in India at three proposed locations – Nauradehi and Kuno-Palpur sanctuaries in Madhya Pradesh and Shahgarh landscape in Rajasthan, with an aim to conserve dryland ecosystems. Y. V. Jhala (Wildlife Institute of India) updates *Current Science* (e-mail to Richa Malhotra, 16 May 2011) on the project adding that 'Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister is keen on reintroducing the cheetah at Kuno, while Rajasthan Government has given a go-ahead signal for Shahgarh area with several conditions and has also suggested an alternative site in Jhalawar (which is being surveyed). There are believed to be oil and gas deposits in the Shahgarh Bulge; the State Government is therefore reluctant to give up these resources for cheetahs. It has been communicated that due to the size of the area, oil/gas exploration and extraction activities would not be detrimental for cheetah conservation and that the area is not intended to be declared as a National Park (therefore, some commercial activities that do not compromise the conservation objectives can go on with safeguards). The Central Government has released a small grant of about 20 lakhs to Wildlife Institute of India for developing site-specific action plans for the reintroduction and for training of the staff/officers at the three selected sites. The larger Cheetah Project Budget for implementing the reintroduction (voluntary rehabilitating core area villages, habitat and prey restoration, construction of fences and holding pens, veterinary facility, etc.) is yet to be approved and sanctioned.'

On 7 July 2010, under the ministry, the Society of Integrated Coastal Management launched the Green Action for National Dandi Heritage Initiative (G.A.N.D.H.I.; <http://moef.nic.in/downloads/public-information/GANDHI-launch.pdf>). The project involves conservation of coastal regions and resources, adopting nature-based development of resources, promoting integrated village and community development, etc. In November 2010, the ministry also laid down the Conservation Action Plan for the Ganges river Dolphin (2010–2012). On 4 May 2011, the ministry came up with the implementation protocol for determination and notification of critical wildlife habitats in National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries, in accordance with the Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers Act (2006) ([http://moef.nic.in/downloads/public-information/Draft\\_CWH\\_Guidelines\\_May\\_2011.pdf](http://moef.nic.in/downloads/public-information/Draft_CWH_Guidelines_May_2011.pdf)).

promote power projects! My job is to ensure that environmental concerns are met when power projects are implemented, but my mandate is not to go for blind implementation of coal-based projects. If you look at the coal-based projects, they have a huge impact on the environment. First of all to mine the coal you have to destroy the forests and putting up a coal-based plant will cause pollution. So, one has to be concerned with all these issues.

*What is expected in the 12th Five-Year Plan?*

We are launching the Green India Mission oriented towards climate change and also improving the quality of our forests. About 21% of India's geographical area is under forest (~69 m ha), but 40% of it is degraded forest. So we must improve the quality of the forests. We have been chanting for the last 50 years this mantra that we must have one-third area under forests, but it doesn't make sense if the quality is going to be poor. Our first focus is to improve their quality (in the context of climate change and carbon sequestration potential) and address ecologically vulnerable areas (mangroves and grasslands). The Green India Mission has also been put out into the public domain and was opened to public consultation.

In terms of the environment, we are looking for a major programme to clean our rivers. We have launched the National Ganga River Basin Authority to ensure *nirmala dhara* and *aviral dhara*, both clean as well as uninterrupted flow of water in rivers of the country. We have to preserve our wildlife habitats, which are under threat and by preserving wildlife habitat we are not just preserving the tigers, we are preserving forests, water resources, huge gene banks and sources of biodiversity. So, it is a complex and comprehensive agenda that we have.

**Richa Malhotra** (*Ramaseshan Fellow*).  
e-mail: rchmalhotra@gmail.com