

7 FEB 2011

'Development' vs Environment

P rime Minister Manmohan Singh's observation that enforcement of environmental regulatory standards should not lead to a throwback to the days of the licence-permit raj strikes a jarring note in an era of enlightened, science-based conservation. By projecting regulation as a threat to economic development, he has brought needless pressure to bear on the nascent efforts of Minister Jairam Ramesh to bring accountability and transparency to the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). In his address to the Delhi Sustainable Development Summit, the Prime Minister lamented the weakening of the ancient symbiotic relationship between society and the environment on account of development and population growth; he prescribed the unexceptionable cure of sustainable development and called for inter-generational equity. But his advocacy is short on conviction because it comes laced with the scare scenario of bottleneck controls. It is certainly unhelpful to Mr. Ramesh, who has been working hard to strike the right balance between GDP growth and conservation, reduce carbon emissions without sacrificing growth — and vitally, to steer the MoEF away from the path of rubber-stamped environmental clearances. Such is the pressure on the Ministry, including from other Ministries, that it has had to show cause why it is implementing fundamental laws such as the Forest (Conservation) Act.

The MoEF now has the difficult task of introducing greater scientific rigour in environment impact assessment of projects. The Minister has gone about his job seeking expert counsel, holding public hearings, and publishing committee reports. This refreshing approach also serves a public education function and Mr. Ramesh must persist with it. His priority should be to make the Environment Impact Assessment Notification, 2006 effective; a weak EIA regime can do much harm. The Ministry's committee on the Posco project in Orissa, for instance, recorded "serious lapses and illegalities" in EIA and the majority of members recommended revocation of clearance granted in 2007 for a minor port and steel plant. That the Ministry had to subsequently ignore the report and conditionally clear the project is a measure of the pressure it faces. The present onslaught on environmental regulations, most of which are poorly enforced by State governments, is a far cry from the time of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who pioneered them in a different era. She memorably described unplanned development as violence against the landscape. In recent times, the Forest Rights Act has joined the list of progressive laws protecting the rights of people, and forests. Political India needs to learn the virtues of good environmental governance, which limits exploitation of natural resources to sustainable levels.