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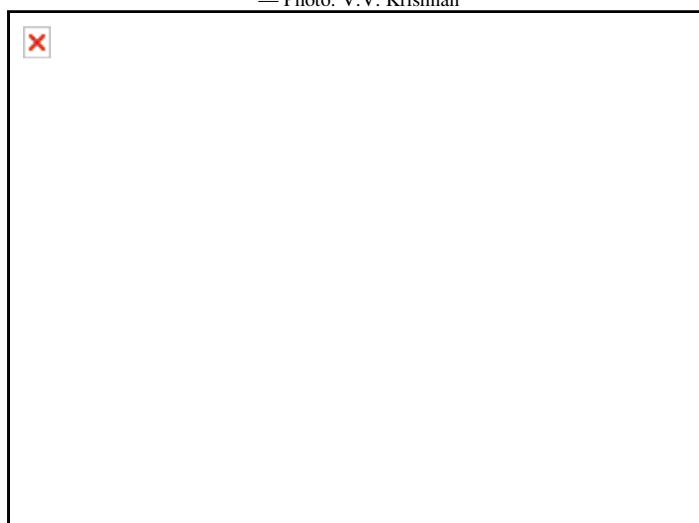
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## 'Push for growth biggest threat to forests'

Special Correspondent

*Need for according local community a stake in forest control: Jairam*

— Photo: V.V. Krishnan



**Nobel laureate Professor Elinor Ostrom with Vinay Bharat Ram, Chairman of Shri Ram Centre, and Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh at the Bharat Ram memorial seminar on 'The Challenge of Self Organising to Govern Commons in India' in New Delhi on Wednesday.**

NEW DELHI: Even as he wants the State to share the control of forest resources with local communities, Union Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh says the single biggest threat to these resources comes from the push for development and growth.

He was speaking at a seminar here on Wednesday on "The Challenge of Self Organising to Govern Commons in India," addressed by Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom, an American economist, who called for a community-led approach to forest conservation.

Mr. Ramesh seemed to agree with her policy advice. "We are now trying to get away from State control of forests, as enshrined in the Forest Rights Act of 2006, to give the local community a stake in forest control," he said, adding that under the community-led model of forest control, the government would have to take the responsibility of building the capacities of local communities.

Planning Commission Deputy Chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia also agreed that it was important for the State to give authority to local people to make rules and impose penalties on the offenders. The Twelfth Five Year Plan would give primacy to this aspect as the business-as-usual approach had not worked, he said.

The Minister was confident of the government's ability to manage the threats of local encroachment by cattle and villagers. "But what can't be managed is this growth dynamic," he said. "And I think in area after area and forest area after forest area, this is becoming the critical choice." The drive for 9 per cent economic growth has spurred industry and development projects to make demands on the country's forest resources. Mr. Ramesh has become notorious for halting several high-profile projects due to ecological considerations.

Questioning the idea that one third of India must be under forest cover, he urged that quality of the cover be given more importance, as increasing the quantity may not be feasible given the demographic and development pressure on land.

"India today has about 70 million hectares under forest cover. Roughly about 21 per cent of India's geographical area is under forest cover. The theology since 1952 has been one-third of India should be under forest cover. After 19 months in this job, I still have to discover what the source of this theology is," Mr. Ramesh said.

"That's why I am trying to change the debate from the quantity of forests to the quality of forests. Because if you look at the 70 million hectares of forest that we have, 40 per cent of this is the open degraded forest," he added.

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