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Published: January 4, 2011 01:57 IST | Updated: January 4, 2011 02:09 IST

Jairam calls for paradigm shift in forest management

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'We must shift to three-fold model of state, communities, and partnership between

More than half of the nation's forests could be moved out of exclusive state control, says Union Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh. He has his way.

"We need a complete paradigm shift in the way we look at forest management in the state, but we must shift to a three-fold model of state, communities, and partnership," he told *TheHindu* soon after accepting the report of the N.C. Saxena Committee on forest management implementation.

"Out of the total 70 million hectares, I'd say about 35-40 million hectares could be moved out of exclusive state control to management or partnership between the Forest Department and communities," he said in "preliminary estimates."

It is still not clear what such a move could mean for industrialists and developers. Many complain that the process of getting gram sabha approval before applying for FRA, as stipulated by the FRA, is too onerous. If complete control is handed over to communities in certain forest areas, it is unclear what changes would need to be made in the current FRA.

The Saxena Committee's recommendations on future forest governance and management were signed by nine members signing the main recommendations and 10 others proposing alternative models. Some had warned against extending the FRA too far.

However, the committee's report was clear in criticising the State and Central Government for not implementing the FRA, which provides for individual and community forest rights. It noted that land rights claims have faced legal challenges and decisions of gram sabhas have not been respected.

In another step to stop harassment of tribals by forest officials, especially in North Eastern states, the government plans to amend the Indian Forest Act in the next session of Parliament.

Keywords: [forest management](#), [Forest Rights Act](#)