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A Climate-Change Chameleon

It's hard to tell whether New Delhi really understands the economic cost of fighting 'global warming.'

By Mary Kissel
New Delhi

"The climate world is divided into three: the climate atheists, the climate agnostics, and the climate evangelicals. I'm a climate agnostic."

The question is, what comes next? The author of the Copenhagen Consensus (not to be confused with December's Copenhagen summit), Danish economist Bjorn Lomborg, has talked about a "third way" forward: acknowledging that climate change is real, but pursuing a cost-benefit approach that would commit countries to projects that yield the greatest benefits for the greatest number of people. "I've read Lomborg," Mr. Ramesh says with a smile. "I don't think you should dismiss Lomborg the way climate evangelicals have dismissed him. He makes reasonable points. The spirit of science is the spirit of enquiry, of questioning."

A direct—some would say brash—man with a penetrating stare, it's hard to believe India's Environment and Forests Minister, Jairam Ramesh, is agnostic about anything. This is the man who dressed down Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last year when she pushed for India to adopt binding emissions targets. He was the first politician of a major nation to question the United Nations' claim that the Himalayan glaciers were melting at a rapid pace. And he's spearheaded his country's very own climate-change research institute—a direct challenge to the U.N.'s now-discredited Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

That record makes Mr. Ramesh one of the few policy makers in the world in a position to push a new, more economically rational approach to climate change—and debate the politics of it, too. It helps that he isn't media-shy. And like many Indian men, Mr. Ramesh has a penchant for the dramatic: "You have unlimited time!" he tells me, hands outstretched, as we settle down to a chat in his darkened office, with a single spotlight shining on the minister himself.

India is a "high-growth, low-emission" economy, Mr. Ramesh explains. "We contribute only about 5% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, and even if we grow at 8% per year, by 2020, we would still be contributing only about 8% of world greenhouse gas emissions." He jabs at the air above his head to make his point, lowering it with each phrase: "So here is China at 23%, here is America at about 22%, and you have Russia at about 9% and India at 5%. So clearly about 45% of the emissions are coming from two countries. . . who don't want to do anything about it."

International negotiations on climate change are "a complete quagmire," Mr. Ramesh says. "We have a Kyoto Protocol in which the U.S. has not ratified. The Europeans are not going to be taking on commitments unless the Americans take it [on]. The Americans are saying we won't take something on until the Chinese take something on. So we are frankly, headed nowhere." If the major negotiating nations take the "same approach" during the U.N. confab in Mexico later this year, "we will meet the same fate as Copenhagen, although the cuisine in Mexico will be far superior to that in Copenhagen."

For New Delhi, that outcome would be a significant victory. A nation of 1.2 billion people, India has long understood that climate-change "intervention" pushed by the U.N., green activists and Al Gore (an "evangelical," snorts Mr. Ramesh)—namely, binding emissions targets—was code for giving up cheap energy sources in exchange for economically unproven technologies. The result would be higher energy costs for India's vast legions of poor, many of whom don't even yet have access to electricity or gas—effectively consigning hundreds of millions of people to continue living in slums.

Given that, Mr. Ramesh is still oddly eager to burnish his climate-change credentials to me, saying with fervor, at the start, that he thinks global warming is a "real" phenomenon. His conflicting instincts have led to heated debate within India. Mr. Ramesh wrote to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh last October and suggested that India reconsider its stance on emissions targets. The letter was conveniently leaked to the press, uproar in parliament and in the business community ensued. Mr. Ramesh backed down. So thanks to India's democratic pressures—no politician here would be caught dead shortchanging the poor, who vote—he's singing a different tune.

Climate change is "one of the main issues" India faces, Mr. Ramesh says. But is it more important than all the other environmental problems India faces? I ask, thinking of stinking gutters I vaulted over, in high heels, to reach his office. "To say that it is the defining issue, no, there are bread-and-butter environmental issues. There are pollution control issues which are affecting the public health. You know, in many parts of India people are dying of cancer because of excess of pesticides in water, or arsenic in water. That's more important and more urgent than climate change."

Other poor countries agree. China, South Africa, Brazil and India "bonded very well together at Copenhagen," Mr. Ramesh reports, neglecting to mention the group's approach—to use the meeting to pressure developed-world nations to squeeze billions of dollars out of developing-world nations' taxpayers. The minister, a self-confessed "China realist," is no political naïf: "We are united in our desire not to have a binding agreement thrust upon us which will constrict our developmental options." He's been to China three times in the last four months, with reciprocal visits from his Chinese counterpart. "Had India and China not been together, I think the complexion of Copenhagen would've been different."

Mr. Ramesh sees "glaring deficiencies in the architecture of climate-change agreements," starting with the "lack of any graduation." As countries move up the "per-capita income ladder," he explains, they should "take on progressively higher levels of legally binding commitments." This makes sense: India is a populous country, but poor. Randomly chosen emission targets become "a game of competitive one-upmanship." "10%, we will cut?," he asks, getting worked up, his voice rising. "15%? It's not a lottery, you know."

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His solution? "We need an international agreement in which all countries participate," Mr. Ramesh says "Common, but differentiated responsibility remains the anchor of that agreement. But every country must commit itself to certain actions."

What kind of actions, though? At home in India, Mr. Ramesh emphasizes one measure he's proud of that hasn't hurt the poor: "We are one of the few countries in the world that is adding to our forest cover," he says, with energy. "Our forest cover in India is equal to the size of Texas. . . And every year, about 10% of our annual greenhouse gas emissions [are] being sequestered by our forests." He hands me a shiny brochure on the topic.

But when I ask him about how his ministry will prioritize his investments—India has a huge fiscal deficit, and can't afford to spray money around willy-nilly—he shifts in his chair. "I think the key is going to be the energy sector. . . What choices we make on fuel mix, on efficiency targets, on transportation, fuel efficiency standards, public-private mix. Railroad mix, very important. Industry." Then he reverts to the worst reflex of Indian policy makers: the government solution. "The Planning Commission has announced an expert group that will prepare the roadmap for a low-carbon road strategy for India," he says confidently.

Of course the most important question is what Mr. Ramesh and his bosses in government are willing to sacrifice to achieve these nebulous goals. Does he think that it's possible to curtail greenhouse-gas emissions without sacrificing economic growth? "It's possible for us to grow at 8%," he says, getting a little testy. "The choice is between 8% and 10%. The choice is not between 8% and 5%, ok?" But even choosing 8% before 10% means hundreds of millions of people won't be lifted out of poverty, right? "Yeah, if it's going to be 10% growth and an unacceptable cost to the environment, and an 8% growth and it's sustainable, I would say an 8% sustainable rate of growth is better for me," Mr. Ramesh says.

We circle back to the original point: Maybe climate change just isn't the international disaster that evangelicals like Mr. Gore said it was. Mr. Ramesh leans back in his chair and a twinkle enters his eye: "When AIDs hit the international agenda, it just meant that malaria, tuberculosis, diarrhea, dysentery all got [pushed] into the background. Climate change has become the AIDs of the environment!" It's a bit dramatic, but not too far off the mark. The question is, does Mr. Ramesh believe it himself?

Ms. Kissel is the editor of The Wall Street Journal Asia editorial page.