

Indira's Bond with Nature

by ALI FAUZ HASSAN



Jairam Ramesh at the event on Monday. Telegraph picture

Guwahati, Aug. 28: Jairam Ramesh, former Union environment minister and author of the book *Indira Gandhi - A Life in Nature*, shedding light on a lesser known aspect of the former Prime Minister, today said she was the first politician to talk about the connection between deforestation and climate change.

Ramesh was in conversation with environmental historian and IIT professor Arupjyoti Saikia, an event organised by the Balipara Foundation, here this evening.

Saikia said Indira Gandhi left behind a legacy which no politician or journalist could ignore. "The book is of a different kind. A book on this subject was long overdue. Nature is a contested theme. The book is questioning the politician's connection with nature at a time when Assam's ecological future is uncertain."

The book is a compilation of Indira Gandhi's personal letters, speeches, articles, forewords she provided to others' books and even her observations on files submitted to her. It is an unconventional biography, reflective of the real Indira Gandhi, her kinship with nature and commitment to environmental causes.

"Most of the biographies on Indira Gandhi have been written on oral recollection, which can be notoriously unreliable. I have based my book on writings available publicly. Indira has two images - one of Durga or a courageous leader and the other as an architect of the Emergency. There are people who admire her and those who criticise her," Ramesh said.

He called Indira Gandhi compelling, charismatic and controversial but an environmentalist at heart who found her inner peace in the company of birds and plants, in the universe of constellations, living in the hills and protecting forests and wildlife of India. "She saw herself as a child of nature, who grew up in nature and who lived with nature," Ramesh said. Between 1929 and 1945, more than 500 letters were exchanged between Indira and her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, who had a profound influence on her life.

Talking about the book's relevance today, Ramesh said, "The book forays into a chronological narration of events in the political history of the foundation of our green legacy through the lens of Indira Gandhi, which gives us an insight into today's environmental structure, the laws and the institutions. Many breakthrough ecological reforms and environmental laws shaped up during her regime. She is the reason India's tigers and forests have a lease of life. She was the first politician to speak about deforestation and its impact on the climate."

Indira Gandhi launched Project Tiger in 1972, not only to save the tigers but to protect the forests as well. The Forest Conservation Act, 1980, the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, the Water Pollution Control Act, 1974, the Air Pollution Control Act, 1981, were all enacted and enforced during her regime. She had set up the ministry of environment and had held the portfolio herself.

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