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## ENVIRONMENT-INDIA: A GREEN CHIEF MINISTER IN A GREEN STATE

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As chief minister of the Indian state of Sikkim, Pawan Kumar Chamling has the onerous job of protecting one of the hottest biodiversity properties in the world.

Chamling has been more than equal to the task. Last month, he earned the title of "greenest chief minister" of India's 22 federal states for policies that range from banning plastic bags to cancelling a major hydro-electric project.

Said Anil Agarwal, chief of the Center for Science and Environment (CSE) which awarded him the title following a nation-wide survey, "Chamling was the only chief minister who had begun worthwhile sustainable development programs."

Chamling, a soft-spoken former soldier, said he knew it was time to get tough when Gangtok, Sikkim's picturesque capital at 2,000 meters in the Himalayas was hit by a series of devastating landslides caused by plastic bags choking up the "jhoras" or large drains.

Originally mountain streams carrying crystal clear water, the jhoras turned into drains as rapid development forced Sikkim's high hills to bear concrete jungles instead of pine forests under the pace of development.

Tourists and trekkers to Sikkim's charmed alpine valleys and mountaineers attempting to scale the massive Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest peak, brought their own contribution of non-biodegradable detritus.

Into the fourth of a five-year term as chief minister, Chamling said he found himself having to make the classic choice between economic growth for the 400,000 people of his remote and deprived state and environmental conservation.

"Sikkim joined the Indian Union only in 1975 after voting in favor of democracy rather than monarchy in a referendum - so we have a lot of catching up to do," Chamling said.

On the other hand, Sikkim has the opportunity of not repeating mistakes made by the older and bigger Indian states. Chamling was particularly determined that rural people should be involved in conservation activity.

"The rural people are the closest to nature and their daily needs of energy and food and fodder are drawn from the forests -- the question is how to maintain the fragile balance between man and nature."

Chamling started out by banning the destructive practice of grazing cattle in Sikkim's thick but dwindling forests. "I have seen what grazing does to forests and anyway cattle are better fed in stalls."

The cowherds have taken the matter to the courts. "We have always grazed our cattle in the open -- besides it costs money to build stalls for cattle and effort to fetch fodder to them," says Nyima, a villager.

Last year, Chamling made amends by introducing the more popular joint-forest management program which innovatively integrates into joint-watershed management. Sikkim has 40 important watersheds.

"People are being asked to draw maps and point out rivers, streams, houses, important historical sites and landslide-

prone areas so that officials can convert them into scientific maps," says Chezung Lachungpa, president of the Green Circle a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Gangtok.

Because the people are involved right from the start we can avoid the kind of conflict that happened with the Rathong Chu hydro electric project.

"That project was begun after consulting contractors and businessmen rather than the local people who were easily duped into getting small compensations for their land," says Jigme Kazi of the Concerned Citizens of Sikkim (CCS).

Initially, Chamling insisted that the project -- begun by Nar Bahadur Bhandari, his political rival and predecessor in power -- must go through because some four million dollars had been spent on it. "But then he heard out the people who live around it," Kazi said.

It became clear to Chamling that the Rathong Chu project would indeed have endangered a glacial lake, submerged an ancient Buddhist monastery and disturbed the fragile ecology on the southern slopes of the Kanchenjunga bordering eastern Nepal.

"We are giving up a lot considering that Sikkim has been estimated to be able to generate about 20,000 MW of electricity which we can export to other states," says Chamling.

That is no idle boast given that Sikkim covers a dizzying drop of 8,000 meters near the Kanchenjunga to near sea level when the state touches the rice fields of neighboring West Bengal state - all in a space of 300 kms.

In his attempts to protect Sikkim's fragile ecology, Chamling has had to take on the army which maintains an awesome presence in a state neighboring China which still does not recognize it as being a part of India.

For example when the army wanted to build a firing range in the northern part of the state overlooking Tibet he lobbied hard to get the project cancelled two years ago.

"The army offered compensation but nothing could have replaced the unique wildlife in the area which includes the snow leopard, the musk deer, Tibetan wild ass, various species of rodents and rare medicinal plants and herbs," said Lachungpa.

But Chamling says the biggest impediment to his attempts to protect Sikkim's environment have come from his own bureaucrats. "Most of them are corrupt and cause unnecessary delays."

The joint-forest management program would have started a year ago but for impediments created in its implementation by bureaucrats who do not like to encourage honest NGOs, he said.

"Take also the ban I imposed on plastic bags which is being flouted openly in many areas of Gangtok -- I cannot personally ensure that the ban is being adhered to," Chamling said.

Other tough, unpopular decisions that Chamling has made include a freeze on permits for commercial vehicles in Gangtok and a halt to construction which has turned the state capital into a collection of unaesthetic, multi-storied concrete boxes.

"I have a plan to introduce urban forestry in Gangtok but that will have to wait till I go to the people and get re-elected next year," he said.

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