



# In Memoriam Ramaswamy R. Iyer (1929-2015)

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**Chief Editor**

**Anjal Prakash**

*International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Nepal*

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**Managing Editor**

**Sumit Vij**

*PhD Researcher, Public Administration and Policy Group, Wageningen University, The Netherlands*



It was the summer of 2007, when I first met Mr Ramaswamy R. Iyer. This was in Delhi in a workshop on water issues. As a young researcher working on drinking water problems faced by the poor communities in rural areas and urban slums, I was impressed with the talk given by him. It was about the ideological basis of present Indian water discourses that were focusing on water laws and water conflicts. He pointed out the root cause that relates to the disfranchisement of the poor from their resource base. I was amazed to hear that he was a career bureaucrat.

'A bureaucrat with a difference', I said to myself, 'whose exemplary public life showed that he worked in favour of creating an alternate vision of water.'

We at the South Asian Water Studies (SAWAS) Journal bring out this special issue to honour his work and contribution towards creating an alternate vision of water, one that is holistic and interdisciplinary in nature.

Born in October 1929 in Thakkalai, Tamil Nadu, Mr Iyer became known for producing a rich body of commentary on water policy and environmental issues. He last served as an honorary research professor at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi. As an officer of the Indian Audit and Accounts Services, Mr Iyer worked as Secretary of Water Resources in the Government of India. He was the initiator and principal writer of the draft for the country's first National Water Policy in 1987. After his retirement from government he worked on water-related issues, in particular on regional cooperation on river water in South Asia. He served on many high-level government committees on environmental and water-related issues. He was also a consultant for international organizations including the World Bank and UNDP. For his exemplary work and public life, he was awarded a Padma Shri in 2014, the fourth-highest civilian honour in India.

Mr Iyer had been closely associated with the Working Group on Water Governance for the Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2012-2017) coordinated by the Planning Commission. This Group had been tasked with reviewing national and international experiences with reforms in the governance of water. It was also to suggest a blueprint for reforms in India, to arrive at an institutional framework that would facilitate setting up various regulatory bodies. He had also been part of a sub-group on a

'National Water Framework Law'. This sub-group had to assess the need for such a law at national level and draft the actual document. It also had to find a mode of enacting this law in the country, given the constitutional provisions related to water.

His academic work and regular columns in The Hindu and the Indian Express helped in shaping public policy discourses on water for more than two decades. His body of work, leaning on centre-left politics, countered popular arguments of taming rivers, thereby contributing to environment vs. development debates. After the Supreme Court had passed a judgement in 2012 favouring the inter-linking of rivers, Mr Iyer wrote sharply focused critiques of the apex court's orders. It looked like he was the sole voice opposing the high and mighty state. It proved to be so, for there were very few voices of dissent with his voice still prominent. Apart from his critical stand against mainstream views in India regarding water, he documented and discussed various regional water treaties. This was, and is, path-breaking work for students and researchers working on water issues.

In this special issue of SAWAS we carry pieces by some of the people who had worked closely with Mr Iyer to understand the trajectory of his professional life. This is a small tribute to him from the community engaged in the issues of democratization of the water sector to benefit the poorest and most marginalized sections of our society, which he cared for, and wrote and researched about.

Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, S. Janakrajan, Dipak Gyawali, Depinder Kapur, Ranjan Panda, Nitya Jacob and K. J. Joy have written on the life and work of Mr Iyer, the person he was, the academician, and the activist. At the end, Safa Fanain reviews the last edited work produced by him, *Living Rivers, Dying Rivers*. The book is a major example of the extraordinary zeal with which Mr Iyer had been working and had produced archetypal works, just before he took his last breath at age 86.

May his soul rest in peace.

Anjal Prakash  
Chief-Editor- SAWAS



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**South Asian Water Studies**

B - 87,  
3rd Avenue, Sainikpuri,  
Secunderabad - 500 094,  
Telangana, India

Phone: +91 40 27116721

Email: [info@saciwaters.org](mailto:info@saciwaters.org) Website: [www.sawasjournal.org](http://www.sawasjournal.org)