



In Memoriam Ramaswamy R. Iyer (1929-2015)

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Standing at the feet of a tall man

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Prof. Ramaswamy Iyer, associated with the Centre for Policy Research in recent years and a towering figure in researching water issues in India, passed away recently in New Delhi, India. His death came swiftly, a result of a viral fever.

In this piece, I reminisce about him on a very personal level, and talk about what he - as a humane person - meant to me. I have known him for a very long time; to me, he was Mr Iyer, and his wife was Suhasini. I will refer to him as Mr Iyer, the way I called him.

As I start writing this, I wonder: 'What can a small person like me write about a gigantic personality like Mr Ramaswamy Iyer?' In trying to think of his influence on rethinking water resources of India, there is so much to say. It is, therefore, no wonder that I feel like one of the five blind men examining the elephant (if you allow me to use the metaphor). He is more prominent than anyone else as a public intellectual in the field of research on water in South Asia, and that is not by virtue of his time in the Ministry of Water Resources as Secretary. There is no doubt that what I say about him will only reflect my limited and subjective glimpses into the multiple facets of the life, work, and personality of Mr Ramaswamy Iyer.

If there is one essential characteristic of Mr Iyer to note at the very outset, it would be his amazing eye for the most intricate and finest detail that was combined with his attention to the 'big picture'. Together, they made him into a robust scholar and critical thinker who was never afraid of saying what he believed to be right.

I would summarize Mr Iyer's impressive and significant contributions to Indian water resource development and the politics surrounding it in one sentence: they represent a radical synthesis of modernity and tradition in thinking about the function of development in India with regard to water. He announced, in no uncertain terms, that the time had come to recognize appropriately the various meanings that water holds - not just to the state, but also to the ordinary people of India.

Mr Iyer had not just initiated a change in the way in which policy-makers in India think about water

and try to manage it in India, but had encouraged a whole generation of scholars in thinking critically about water.

I say this based on personal experience. Over twenty years ago, when I was teaching at an Indian university, the dominant view of water was extremely utilitarian: that the water contained in rivers was a 'resource' only when it was used by humans to meet their needs, and that it was 'wasted' when it flowed into the sea. All the waters were to be measured only as physical quantities, as fixed amounts, and then compared against the numbers of people in order to 'plan' them. There was little space within this paradigm to conceptualize water as a socially constituted element.

Not many experts at the high level of policy-making questioned this numerical, positivist, and functional view of water, or raised issues how these waters were imbued with histories and meanings that varied from culture to culture. Not many of them asked why the waters were soaked with feelings and emotions of people who had lived with them and used them for generations.

Questions were discouraged as to who these ordinary, water-using people were - were they men or women, rich or poor? Did they live in predominantly rural settlements or in urban centres? Who controlled their access to the water, what might be giving rise to their needs and, above all, who benefitted and how, when water resources were centrally planned only by scientists and bureaucrats from far-away places?

But many of us knew intuitively, or through the experience of travelling through villages, that there was something very wrong in this utilitarian view of water. Throughout India, numerous initiatives on thinking about water differently began to be led by ordinary people; collectively, they were presenting an alternative body of evidence. But we needed someone with years of experience, a robust authority, and someone whose voice was significant, to step aside from the statist, boxed thinking and start talking about water differently. Someone who would point out in an easily accessible manner the specific qualities of water - its non-substitutability, its

centrality to life, its public good, and common-pool resource characteristics– in the very specific context of India, where water and people are enmeshed with each other in an inseparable whole.

Ramaswamy Iyer was that someone. Not only was he transforming his own view, but in the process of shifting from the statist view of water resources held by the lofty Ministry of Water Resources, to that held by ordinary people, he also transformed into a significant ally of the non-governmental, community-based organisations. He became close to those of us who wanted to see cleaner rivers, and those who wanted to establish local communities' rights over water resources.

His early articles, published in the journal *Economic and Political Weekly*, opened a window, allowing others to develop fresh views of water resources. These publications about why India should reframe the water debate as 'water resources development', to move away from 'water resource planning', were crucial in reshaping my own thinking about water and rivers (as expressed in my early paper, 'Imagining rivers' in EPW in 1999).

I have been fortunate to receive his generous and unconditional love. For most of my life, I had lived and taught geography at a 'regional' university in small-town India, a discipline that is as moribund as the streams it studies. Yet, I had big dreams and ideas that did not really sit well with the disciplinary training I had received (and was made to teach to my students).

My discipline taught me to believe that rivers were merely lines on the map and our job was to calculate how they bend and make different shapes on maps. The academic world in 1980s and 1990s India was (and still probably is, to some extent in certain places) highly hierarchical. Also, it was always those people who were part of one or the other 'charmed circle' who mattered, making academics like us almost invisible.

I was lucky to have met someone like him who let me speak before my turn and flourish in my chosen way.

I met Mr Iyer when he came to Calcutta for a conference, and I was immediately engaged by his impressively sharp intellect. This meeting was fortuitous and led to invitations –sent by him– to take part in wider water debates, eventually leading to my participation in not just the Track III Initiatives on South Asian water but also to

various activities of the National Alliance for People's Movement including submissions to the World Commission on Dams.

Since then, throughout all these years, ours remained a friendship between two unequals. When compiling his edited book, *Water and the Laws in India*, he asked me if I would contribute a chapter on gender and water laws. Only someone of his stature could persuade me to venture into a difficult and untrodden terrain such as this. Looking back, I think that writing that chapter has further refined my perspectives on gender and water.

Over all these years, I have been fortunate to remain in touch across the oceans. He never ceased to amaze me with the generosity of his mind, his sense of humour, and, most importantly, his sense of justice and fair play.

I am not alone in having been this fortunate. I have heard from others how he had mentored and built friendships with many other 'trivial' people like me. I am sure all these people are mourning his passing away with as much sorrow as I. It is to his credit that he actively sought out people languishing in insignificant places in the excessively hierarchical Indian scholarly world and trying to rethink water – not just as a substance of utility for nation-building but as a resource that builds communities.



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