



In Memoriam Ramaswamy R. Iyer (1929-2015)

Table of Contents

Standing at the feet of a tall man <i>Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt</i>	01 - 02
A Tribute <i>S. Janakrajan</i>	03 - 05
An exemplary public intellectual <i>Dipak Gyawali</i>	06 - 07
Remembering Ramaswamy Iyer <i>Depinder Kapur</i>	08 - 11
Rivers have just lost a great voice of theirs <i>My times and trysts with India's Water Wisdom</i> <i>Ranjan K Panda</i>	12 - 15
Centre vs States <i>Nitya Jacob</i>	16 - 18
A dissenting voice in the water sector <i>K. J. Joy</i>	19 - 23
At the threshold between living and dying <i>Book review of Living Rivers, Dying Rivers</i> <i>Safa Fanaian</i>	24 - 25
Selected Works of Mr. Ramaswamy R Iyer	26



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A Tribute

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Ramaswamy R. Iyer, former Water Resources Secretary, Government of India, an acclaimed intellectual, profound writer with versatile knowledge, and an academic activist passed away after a brief illness on 9 September 2015 in New Delhi. Till the end, he held the position of Honorary Research Professor at the Center for Policy Research, New Delhi. K.J. Joy and I have already published tributes to him that appeared in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (26 September 2015, Vol. L, No. 39). In this brief note I intend to write something more on him, which we could not do earlier.

For all those who know Prof. Ramaswamy Iyer only as a bureaucrat will be surprised. For academics like me, he was more a researcher and an activist-academic than a bureaucrat. Of course, this is in no way to undermine his credentials and contributions as a member of the Government. As a civil servant, he acted with great zeal, eminence, and perseverance.

To the best of my knowledge, his contributions as a bureaucrat were quite significant at least in two respects:

(a) He was the one who brought into being the National Water Policy in India in 1987. This public document, although not backed by legislation, was instrumental in generating a good deal of public debate and awareness. Indeed, the first priority given to the use of drinking water in this document has travelled a long distance since its publication. Subsequent National Water Policies are in a way updated versions of it.

(b) He played a special role in resolving the India-Bangladesh dispute regarding the sharing of Ganges water. There is no doubt that his active commitment, intelligence, and involvement were instrumental in the process that led to the resolution of this dispute and the signing of the Treaty of 1996.

Prof. Ramaswamy Iyer became more active after retirement. He was recognized very well among academics – more so among water professionals, not only in India but also abroad. He could be

seen in almost all key professional meetings across the globe. He was regarded as a water expert, not because he retired as Secretary Water Resources but because of his hard work and motivated research. This is manifested very well in all his writings.

He was a regular contributor to the *Economic and Political Weekly*, *The Hindu*, and the *Indian Express*. He had to his credit an extraordinary record of publications. He published nine books of which five were on water issues. He wrote 23 articles on subjects such as social justice, politics, literature, culture, and philosophy; 64 articles on issues relating to public enterprises, public administration, economic policy, and governance; and, amazingly, 197 articles on water and environment. Moreover, it is incredible that he also produced 24 articles on music. All his articles were brought out between 1983 and 2015. Such a versatile genius had some kind of retreating thoughts. Way back in 2003, he sent me a mail in which he had expressed them as follows:

'Dear Janak, Over the years my lack of enthusiasm for big 'water resource development' projects, my criticisms of the Narmada judgment, my association with the World Commission on Dams, my advocacy of local, community-led water-harvesting initiatives, my critique of the National Water Policy 2002, and most recently, my writings on the river-linking project, have made me suspect in the eyes of the Indian Water Establishment. I have been criticised as "biased", anti-dam, anti-establishment, anti-national, and so on, and the criticisms have tended to degenerate into personal attacks and a questioning of my credentials. The intention is not so much to answer my points as to damage my standing and undermine my credibility. This does not worry me personally (my self-esteem is not so low), but this campaign of denigration may have some impact on my ability to communicate, persuade and influence thinking, and the receptivity that I can expect from my readers and audiences. I am thinking about how best I can counter this, and shall be grateful for any ideas that you may have. Best wishes. Ramaswamy' (email

dated 4-9-2003)

I wrote back saying how could he expect anything better from his critics. I suggested that he should reply to them with even more committed publications.

He was a positivist with absolute outspokenness. Very rarely one comes across a bureaucrat like him who had such a good deal of passion, aptitude for learning, humble mind to correct mistakes, and above all the intellect to care all his critics.

It is important to scrutinize why he had so many critiques in the 'Indian Water Establishment'. The answer is not quite far to find. He served the government for several decades and so it was expected that he would support all their initiatives, policies, and programmes. Indeed, the government was very desperate, when they set up a five-member committee (in which he participated), which studied a number of issues relating to the controversial Narmada Project (Sardar Sarovar Project) during 1993-95.

Then, how did Ramaswamy Iyer, a civil servant, began to take an activist position on water and environment related issues? Let us look for the clue in his own letters:

'When I was Secretary, Water Resources, in the Government of India, in the 1980s, I enjoyed a very good relationship with my colleagues and subordinates; that goodwill continued for a while after my retirement, but changed to strong disapproval as I began questioning and criticizing big-dam projects.' (p.168)

'In 1987, I left the Ministry a few months ahead of my formal date of retirement from the civil service to take up another government assignment for three years (on 're-employment', as it is called in India), but my interest in water policy and related issues continued. In 1989, I wrote an article on Large Dams: the Right Perspective (Economic and Political Weekly, 30 September 1989) which was widely read and much appreciated by both the supporters and opponents of big-dam projects because it took a 'balanced' position on the controversy over dams. In a scale of 1 to 10 (from total support to big dams to total opposition), the article occupied the mid-point. Over the ensuing decade, as a result of much reading, thinking and discussion, my position moved from that central point to a further point closer to 10,

say, 7 or 8 (but not to 10).Those 'changing perspectives' were partly the results of two major movements against the adverse impacts of large projects, one led by Medha Patkar and her Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement) against the Sardar Sarovar Project in Gujarat on the Narmada River, and the other led by Sunderlal Bahuguna against the Tehri hydroelectric Project on two tributaries of the Ganga in the north.' (p.170)

Ramaswamy R. Iyer, 'The story of a troubled relationship', Water Alternatives, 6 (2), 2013, p. 168-176, www.water-alternatives.org

Perspectives on inter-state water disputes

Professor Iyer had deep insights and critical thinking on inter-state water disputes in India and on the legal recourse available to resolve them. Though longstanding inter-state water disputes seem to have been legally resolved in India, conflicts continue to arise for several reasons. In the particular context of the Cauvery water dispute he raised a number of legitimate questions: The Cauvery water dispute is adjudicated but unresolved, why? How can the Supreme Court intervene in the adjudication process after the constitution of the Tribunal by allowing the Special Leave Petitions? What kind of political and otherwise compulsions are confronted by the state and central governments?

Precisely in this context he had very high hopes on the Cauvery Family ('Track 2 diplomacy initiative' carried out by me). He was one of the key advisers of this initiative ever since it was started in 2003, until its last meeting held in Bangalore in 2011. He helped in arriving at water sharing formulae. But towards the end he became a bit disillusioned because of a lack of recognition for this initiative from state governments.

Why had the Cauvery Dispute become so difficult? He summarized it in three points: Firstly, he indicated that the Cauvery water dispute was different from other inter-state water disputes in India: While many inter-state disputes were fought over sharing surplus water, in the case of the Cauvery, it was about 're-sharing' already over-utilized water. This has made the dispute more intense.

Secondly, he strongly felt that, since the issue was enmeshed in electoral party politics in both

States and at the Centre, to have mutual space and adjustments to resolve the dispute would be very hard.

Thirdly, since the Cauvery River is so emotional for the people of both States (on account of their strong historical, cultural, and religious sentiments and attachments) dispute resolution through a normal adjudication process becomes more complicated.

Yet, he was of the strong view that there was a need for give and take between the contending states even for the adjudication process to become more meaningful. In particular, he felt that if Karnataka offered no satisfactory response to Tamil Nadu's anxiety about the release of water in June and July, the latter would never get satisfied. Hence the deadlock might continue to persist in the middle of official problems and delays in the adjudication process.

This takes us to his strong views on the Inter-State Water Disputes Act. He felt that the preference to an agreed settlement to the adjudication process needed to be explored to the maximum possible. Delays at every stage of tribunal proceedings (i.e., in the establishment of a tribunal, and in the processes of adjudication) would make the conditions of inter-state disputes worse. Yet, he thought, the proceedings need not be adversarial, they could be conducted in a constructive spirit. If that spirit was absent, other routes (negotiations, conciliation, and mediation) would also fail.

He also wondered what would be next, in case of non-implementation of the Tribunal's Award.

On the National Water Policy (NWP)

Since bringing out the first NWP in 1987, Professor Iyer remained quite involved, so he contributed a great deal to the debates when the NWP 2012 was released. At that time, I was not very enthusiastic about the practical utilities of the NWP. So I sent him a mail with a number of questions such as: What are the implications of having a policy not backed by legislation? To what extent had past water policies helped to regulate groundwater use or abuse, to control water and river pollution, to establish water rights of the common man, to have a rethink on big dams, to ensure safe, protected, and adequate drinking water to all in the country, to control the unauthorized use of surface and groundwater by private industries to ensure environmental flow in the rivers?

I questioned him about the practical use of having a NWP. Could a common person go to court on the basis of what was stated in the NWP? Could anyone challenge the government with that document in hand? Lastly, did government programmes on water reflect the NWP?

He sent me a very sharp reply which I reproduce below:

'Cynicism about a national water or any other policy is dangerous. 'Realism' about Indian circumstances is not necessarily a virtue. Should we be equally 'realistic' about, say, corruption, or the prevalence of inter-community prejudice, or the instinctive Indian tendency to disobey all laws and rules?' (e-mail dated 12 March 2011)

I am tempted to write more and more..But I must stop here with an appropriate quote from Professor Ramaswamy Iyer, which could clearly summarize present water concerns in the country:

'Current economic philosophy exalts consumption and growth. If we are hypnotized by visions of 8 per cent or 10 per cent growth, we are bound to 'demand' more and more and still more water; and either government engineers or private companies and their engineers will come up with supply-side answers in the form of large projects which will cause even greater distress to the rivers. At the same time, economic growth and urbanization will mean an enormous generation of waste, some of which may find its way into the water sources.'

(Ramaswamy R. Iyer, ed., Living Rivers, Dying Rivers. OUP, Delhi, 2015, p. 441).



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