



In Memoriam Ramaswamy R. Iyer (1929-2015)

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An exemplary public intellectual*

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I first met Ramaswamy Iyer in the mid-1980s at an official Nepal-India water meet when he was India's water resources secretary and I the youngest member on the Nepali side whose main task was to take notes and prepare the minutes. I remember him as slimly built and impeccably dressed, an image I must admit that did not change at all over the next quarter of a century. I came to know and work with him. Although the official status difference between us was wide then, we did talk only because I was doing the writing on our side and he was very particular about every word and punctuation. It was only towards 1990 when I had left Nepal government service and Ramaswamy ji was loosely affiliated with a Ford Foundation-funded and George Verghese-led Track 2 transboundary research initiative between Nepal, India and Bangladesh, that we began to interact more frequently.

At that time I had serious difficulties with the Verghese school of thought advocating the 'gift of the Greater Ganga', which held that a cornucopia could be showered onto the poor BIMARU states of the Ganga basin as well as Nepal and Bangladesh if only large dams could be built all over the Himalayan tributaries. I eased myself out of that tri-country study project to concentrate on the problems of economic malfeasance and social injustice in other water development projects, specifically the World Bank-led Arun-3 and the duplicitous Tanakpur 'understanding' by the Indian hydrocracy towards Nepal. It dawned on me much later that Ramaswamy ji too was having deep philosophical problems with that school of thought in particular and his own almatem hydrocracy, so to speak, in general.

His frustrations with a construction-focused hydrocracy that refused to reform or engage with critics became obvious when he reviewed my book, *Water in Nepal* (which subsequently came out as Zed Book's *Rivers, Technology and Society* and which argued for treating water as an interdisciplinary focal point away from the hegemony of civil engineering and liberal economics). Ramaswamy ji, while sceptical of the integrative social sciences called Cultural Theory it was based on, mentioned that he was

disappointed that this book had not been written by an Indian!

How insular the Indian hydrocracy had become came home to me about ten years ago at a Stockholm World Water Week when Indian academics from Jaipur and Chennai I collaborated with wanted me to meet their water minister (I was by then Nepal's ex-water minister). Accompanying the luminary was a senior Indian hydrocrat, probably now long retired and forgotten, who very deferentially asked me whom I collaborated with in Delhi. Unthinkingly I replied: 'Ramaswamy Iyer'. I still vividly remember the hydrocrat recoiling in horror and inadvertently blurting out: 'But Sir, he is a traitor!' When I replied that I thought Ramaswamy was perhaps the best water secretary India ever had, he was embarrassed that he had said what he did, but the praise coming from a Nepali must have convinced him even more that Ramaswamy was up to no good, consorting with suspicious foreign country politicians who advocated environmentalism!

I made the diplomatic mistake of relating this story to Ramaswamy ji and could see how saddened he was to have proof that the agency he earlier headed with such high standards of intellectual and professional leadership had descended to such depths in paranoia and parochialism. It seems by then he had done sufficient reading of cultural theory and its 'constructive engagement' between different social solidarities: he remarked to me that perhaps in Nepal such an engagement between civil society and the hydrocracy was still possible but not in India at the time. We discussed how many of India's premier educational establishments were still treating water as a subject for civil engineering construction and not water management in its interdisciplinary totality; and their young products were filling up the IAS only to jump into bed with corrupt contractors and suppliers at the first opportunity. I remember telling him that Nepali bureaucrats and politicians were masters at importing the worst of Indian bad habits and 'constructive engagement' was an uphill task in Kathmandu as well.

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An endearing moment that revealed the man was when he agreed to come to the World Water Forum in Amsterdam in 2000 with a whole host of young scholars and activists from Nepal and India. The Ford Foundation's water programme had some funds which all of us had agreed to economize on to ensure that the maximum number of folks could participate. It meant the cheapest KLM tickets as well as lodging in Amsterdam in what were summer huts with bunk beds in shared rooms. Ramaswamy ji had no problems sharing bunks with much younger colleagues in the same room and engaging in discussions over breakfast or dinner: his was not a world of hang-ups over rank and seniority but one of exploring new ideas and contrary views.

This is what allowed him to come up with new insights that shed a different light on old problems. One such is the much abused word 'stakeholder', and Ramaswamy ji's comments are what I have been quoting all around the world in the keynotes that I am asked to deliver. Development agencies are notorious for sanitizing issues from their politics and this is one of the classic words that represent the distortion of reality. It apparently comes from the American Wild West and the largest land grab in history where White settlers could drive a stake into the prairie wilds and claim ownership over Native American grazing grounds. Ramaswamy ji's gem was: 'There are no such things as stakeholders – there are only stake winners and stake losers and which side you are on.'

He was also quick to see injustice when presented with evidence and quick to suggest remedies. A colleague and I had once gone to his house to pay him a visit and discuss the situation in Nepal. From 2005 November on, Nepal had entered a period of political instability aided and abetted by an Indian establishment that wanted 'regime change'. Corporate business- owned Indian mass media, both print and electronic, regularly practices what we call 'handout journalism', i.e. reporting from Kathmandu, if at all, mostly based on embassy handouts followed by pashmina shopping for the duration of the trip. This practice has resulted in Indian intellectuals and opinion makers remaining fairly ignorant about what really goes on in the neighbourhood and how it might adversely affect Indian interests.

For example, both Tanakpur and the Mahakali Treaty issues have roiled Nepal's politics for over a decade, but even as Nepali media was running purple prose every day, there was hardly any coverage in Indian mainstream papers. The reverse held true when the (then) King was being demonized: headlines about the 'doings' of obscure royal relatives were the norm; notably,

subsequent to 'regime change', the incompetence and malfeasance of the current crop of Nepali leaders scarcely received any mention.

Ramaswamy ji suggested I write a regular column from Kathmandu with contrary, alternative views. I agreed provided that he and another good friend, S. Janakarajan from MIDS, stood guarantee that what I wrote would not be mangled, editorially or content-wise. He approached the publisher of a prominent daily broadsheet read widely by Delhi bureaucrats and was shocked to receive an email reply essentially saying that their edit line was 'regime change' in Nepal and that they would not entertain alternative views! Ramaswamy ji forwarded me the email with a plea that I write anyway and hopefully my pieces would be published for their merit. I had to politely decline, telling him that educating the Indian masses was neither a mission I could be effective in, nor would I start that crusade with so biased a publisher. But this incident highlighted to me the man's essential integrity and the lengths he would go to ensure that truth and justice prevailed.

Whenever I have praised Ramaswamy ji behind his back to some Indian NGO activists, I was often told in a snide tone that when he was secretary and with power to do something, he did not say or do the things he now says and does. I believe this is a completely wrong assessment, one that misses understanding the nature of the job and the actual powers an individual really enjoys. First, a secretary's job is to further the existing policy of the ministry, not his or her personal views though he may have them. If the prevalent official policy was to push the projects, he had to.

Second, Ramaswamy ji, like most of us, was not blessed with perfect information. Thus, the real issue is how honest we are about learning uncomfortable truths while on such a public service job. If questions of injustice during eviction and resettlement – all stemming from the colonial legacy that Indian departments and ministries still bear the burden of – had been filtered out of the files, there would likely be little by way of alternative information a secretary just promoted to the job would have in order to hold a different opinion. The issue is whether one is honest in one's enquiries when faced with sufficient evidence that something is wrong. On this kasauti Ramaswamy Iyer passes with flying colours, not just in his upholding the maryada of the high office that he once occupied, but also in his subsequent role as a public intellectual. For both his rectitude and intellectual integrity, he will long remain a role model for many South Asian water scholars, professionals and activists.



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