



In Memoriam Ramaswamy R. Iyer (1929-2015)

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Chief Editor

Anjal Prakash

International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Nepal

Managing Editor

Sumit Vij

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

Remembering Ramaswamy Iyer

Depinder Kapur

Independent Consultant, New Delhi, India

It was with a sadness that I read the mail from my friend Rajesh: 'Ramaswamy R Iyer, scholar, activist and policy-maker, Honorary Professor, Centre for Policy Research, formerly Secretary, Water Resources, Govt of India, whose incisive writings have illuminated our understanding of rivers and shaped India's water policy, passed away in Delhi on Wednesday 9 September 2015.' This sadness was shared by many of us. Mr Iyer was among the last remaining generation of seniors who saw, and saw through, the massive change from colonial period to a state-led development model promising equity and growth for all, to the current market-led development version that promises even more while delivering less and less.

Mr Iyer was good in taking people along in what he was engaged with, as also accepting invitations and joining likeminded initiatives from others. People, rivers, and water remained his passion, he grew closer to researchers and activists who addressed these issues and gave equal affection to all. His last work on 'Dying Rivers, Living Rivers', brought him close to Himanshu Thakkar and SANDRP. I remember him for his detailed response to the Water Law Framework 2013 of the Alagh Committee, which set aside the Planning Commission work that Mr Iyer was leading. The dialogue he entered into through a public debate was such a rich learning to all.

Not that he was always like this. His engagement with activists and civil society on critical issues of dams and displacement perhaps changed the way he looked at water in the government. He admitted to the weakness of the 1987 Water Policy that he had helped draft in the Ministry of Water Resources. Working in the government at higher positions and, for that matter in NGOs as well, today means doing a lot of administrative work and little time for research and analysis and perspective development on basic issues¹.

With his later outlook, Mr Iyer would get down to interacting with activists and researchers, make regular visits to see for himself, and have a regular engagement on email with anyone who sought his help. The books he published after retirement from the government are rich in

research and content and demonstrate the seriousness and effort he devoted in writing.

My brief interaction and working with him was on citizens' initiatives in Delhi on the Right to Water, the Water Conflict Forum work of SOPPECOM, for an Indo-Bangladesh Water Dialogue he had invited me for at the Centre for Policy Research, and finally for 'Dying Rivers' meetings he organized. He would personally reach out and invite, would respond to invitations, and also take on debates with dissenting activists. It was amazing to see him work tirelessly, sit through long meetings, and come up with useful comments and critiques. He was moderate in his exchanges, sometimes showing discomfort and impatience, but, after sitting through daylong meetings, only then expressing dissent. I remember once, when an activist friend sent a nasty email to him on the issue of Delhi water, he chose to respond to it instead of ignore, and to continue engaging on the subject.

In November 2013, SOPPECOM had organised a meet on 'Water in Delhi', to facilitate the lifelong work and contribution of Mr Iyer. While accepting this honour (an event to be graced by the Vice-President of India), he made a striking comment about how he accepted to be honoured in this manner – if only this would help his voice reaching the still opaque Ministry of Water Resources' corridors.

I would like to give a few other tributes:

Jyotsna Kapur

He belonged to a generation that saw the historic change in India from colonialism to independence and the shift to neo-liberalism. Coupled with his own experience in the Government and his engagement with civil society, activists, and researchers, he was able to see the change more clearly than many others. The aggressive, rapacious, capitalist exploitation of resources and people, garbed in the language of development and growth. Hence his loss at this crucial juncture is a big loss.

Shiney Verghese

Considering that he is also from the IAS cadre, he let himself move farthest from the establishment compared to others who took a similar path after retirement.

Amita Baviskar

What was notable about Iyer's conversion was that it was not a leap of faith but a conviction that grew out of a careful consideration of facts. He remained open-minded, judiciously weighing arguments for and against large projects, with a balance firmly calibrated to the constitutional principles of social justice and the public good. And he dedicated himself to pursuing this commitment in his characteristic style: never preachy or polemical, he invited others to think for themselves, persuading them with the rigour and clarity of his thoughts.

Working tirelessly till the end, Iyer created a body of scholarly and popular writing that stands out for its erudition and lucid exposition. His widely-read analyses of the Cauvery dispute, the inter-linking of rivers, resettlement and rehabilitation laws, and the larger institutional context in which water is managed, have shaped public debate on these issues³. An even bigger achievement is that his work has compelled bureaucrats and engineers to re-examine their own practices and prejudices.

Mr Iyer represented a generation of civil servants that engaged with professional NGOs for the first time. The credibility of professional civil society was built on some thematic intellectual leadership and programming. SPWD, the Centre for Science and Environment, Development Alternatives, MYRADA, VIKSAT, and PRIYA were among the first professional NGOs set up in mid 1980s. Each had a niche to offer and secured institutional funding from liberal western government aid agencies from mid 1980s. The growth of Indian professional NGOs in the mid 1980s was supported by some sensitive and capable ex-bureaucrats like Mr Iyer. I have worked with some of them: Mr VB Easwaran at SPWD, Anil Shah in AKRSP, Mr Ashok Jaitly with TERI and now with Mr Meenakshisundaram.

The 1998 nuclear blasts and withdrawal of liberal, western civil-society funding in its aftermath, the aggressive privatization and market-led growth model of the mid 1990s that needed a "development with a human face" symbolism of the first decade of the twenty first century India, has impacted the role of the professional NGOs.

NGOs are now expected to play a more supportive/suppliant role to government welfare programmes. Instead of questioning the development paradigm, NGOs were expected to play a supportive role in policy formulation and then the monitoring of policy implementation in the UPA government from 2005-14. The introduction of UPA welfare programmes and enactments - Right to Food, Employment and Education - are not likely to see support from the new government - highlighted the grave condition of the Indian economy. That a 'human face' was needed to hide the underlying extreme inequality, increasing from the mid 1990s, showed that the development story of India of the 1990s liberalization and privatization era was floundering.

The space for critical thinking and actions in terms of small NGO projects has shrunk in the last decade. While innovative small grants funding for grassroots work has hit rock bottom, several international development agencies have gone for the mantra of 'scaling up'. Running 'district wide projects' and 'state level project management units' for government programme support is the new flavour of international development. The critical space that the mid 1990s NGOs had taken up has been more or less given up.

Instead of focusing on the larger challenges, the development priorities of most international and national development agencies today are limited to a narrow range of attractive sounding aims - farmers as solar-power harvesters and sellers of solar power to state grids, how to make dryland tribal farmers earn at least as much as a peon in a private bank, etc. Even academic and research institutions are shying away from research and advocacy on core issues in the farm and non-farm sector economy of India.

It is here that the loss of Mr Iyer to civil society is deeply felt. A loss of credible, higher level analytical and critical capability, appreciation for detail, and commitment for support of people's democratic struggles.

Mr Iyer was also a member of the Board of the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES), highly valued for his perspective and guidance, and support of larger, people-centric and ecological priorities. Nowadays Boards of many international and national development NGOs suffer from myopic members' perspectives that restrict the scope of these NGOs from taking up larger meaningful work.

A reading of the list of his writings and analyses in the last two years highlights Mr Iyer's concern about the new 'development paradigm' being ruthlessly pushed through in India today. His writings have always been persuasive and not polemical, as Amita Baviskar writes, but one of his last emails (shared by Rajeswari Raina) shows that Mr Iyer was equally capable of putting his arguments in a political language.

Mr Iyer's own words and commentary on 'development' today, in an email he wrote in June 2015, read as follows:

'Some ruling axioms forming part of the prevailing climate of opinion:

1. Development = Projects (industrial, mining, hydroelectric, industrial corridors, SEZs, expressways, shopping malls, bullet trains.....).

2. All projects are good.

3. All projects must be cleared, rejection is not an option.

4. All projects must be cleared instantly. More than a couple of days for clearance constitutes 'delay' and is unacceptable.

5. Land for projects (as defined above) must be made available instantly.

6. All talk of environmental concerns, displacement of people, 'consent' for land acquisition, farmers' rights, tribal communities' constitutional rights, social impact assessments, concern about transfer of land from agriculture, etc, is deplorable. It is anti-development, anti-national, foreign-funded.

7. Any reference to farmers' suicides is a distraction from the pursuit of development, as defined above. They are an unavoidable concomitant of development. Large-scale alienation of agricultural land, and take-over of the commons by the state and/or industry, are inevitable and necessary stages in capitalist development - and capitalist development is what we need.

8. Ease of doing business and the primacy of industry ought to be our sacred national principles, over-riding the Constitution.

9. Coming to rivers, they exist in order to be dammed. The more dams and barrages

on a river, the better for the country. If development demands the killing of rivers, so be it. Sentimentality about rivers is bad for the country.

10. In particular, run-of-the-river hydroelectric projects are our topmost priority, never mind what they do to rivers. The myth that such projects are 'green' must be constantly propagated, despite all evidence to the contrary. The fact that among all human interventions in nature RoR HEPs are the very worst should be stoutly denied. EIAs are bad enough, 'Cumulative Impact Assessments' are dangerous and sub-versive ideas.

11. If the judiciary shows undue interest in environmental, ecological, equity, human rights and social justice issues, it should be firmly put in its place. The independence of the judiciary is a luxury that India cannot afford.

12. Broadly speaking, the above is a capsule - perhaps over-simplified - version of the thinking of our captains of industry, which finds an echo among neo-liberal economists, and apparently (I am open to correction here) in the Government.'

There is no national development project in which the large majority of Indians see a future for themselves. They can give their farm land for highways and industry and then live on what they get from it as compensation for some time. For the vast majority that does not own farmland, even this option is not there and they face the threat of losing their livelihoods as farm labourers instead. Going to the cities and joining the ranks of manual labour, service providers as maids, drivers, deliverymen, chowkidars and in low paying hospitality and burgeoning sex trade is all they can look forward to. There is no national development project that offers the youth opportunities for higher education and work in social service sector in education and research and a much needed expanded health care and public services system.

The neo liberal discourse we see today in India is a public relations war to justify privatizing basic services and a reduction of welfare spending for diverting more and more tax resources to wasteful infrastructure spending in the name of development. One logic given is that people should not be given anything for "free", that "free services lead to poor quality services and in due course to no services". Hence free public

services in health, education, water and sanitation, electricity – are against the basic concept of development and growth. This is a myth. Even developed countries ensured free or low cost housing for the poor, free or affordable water and sanitation as a public investment and quality health care and education. The myth of “free services” is also factually untrue in Indian context. Firstly, the government collects more indirect taxes including VAT and service tax on anything we purchase. Even the poorest who do not pay direct taxes, pay several indirect taxes to the state and central government in all purchases they make. Hence even if they get subsidized or free basic services, they are not getting them for free. Secondly, in a civilized society, the state is entrusted with imposing limitations on freedom of citizens and to maintain a law and order for the status quo to prevail. If the status quo leads to lack of basic services and a minimum quality of life, even as described by our constitution as conditions for a meaningful realization of the “Right to Life”, then the legitimacy of the state is not there to govern and impose restrictions on freedoms. The state cannot absolve itself from this responsibility by claiming that it cannot provide things for free⁴.

If the economy was growing with distributive incomes and welfare, there would have been no need to go for public discourse to justify cut in welfare spending. The discourse on justifying reduced state welfare spending is not only taking away the little that was given, it is creating an impression that the poor are responsible for their low incomes and inability to pay more for better quality services. The logic of reduced welfare expenditure and more infrastructure spending to boost production and incomes is lapped up by the middle class that sees more opportunity for their children and better quality of services that they can pay for.

Larger, basic questions remain on what is national development we are talking about today? What is planned for increased food-grain production for a growing population, what is the plan for investing in agriculture in the East-India belt? What is the plan for providing higher education, health, and old age care, and other

public services? While ambitious targets for industry, digital media, introducing Bullet Trains, and Super Fast Highways are defined, don't we need time-bound targets for, say, providing super speciality hospitals and hi-tech universities in at least 50% of all districts of India?

What is being planned is a pittance for the social sector as compared to its needs. Recognizing these and carrying on the struggle to secure them will be a fitting tribute to Mr Ramaswamy Iyer, and to our parents' generation.

¹ Iyer, R 2014, 'Against developmental fundamentalism', *The Hindu*, 30 May.

² Iyer, R 2014, *Environment and Development: Some Thoughts for the New Government*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLIX No. 25, pp. 19-21.

³ Iyer, R 2014, 'Let the river take its course', *The Indian Express*, 30 September.

⁴ Iyer, R 2014, *A development Manifesto*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLIX Nos. 43 & 44, pp. 25-26



SAWAS

South Asian Water Studies

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

Phone: +91 40 27116721

Email: info@saciwaters.org Website: www.sawasjournal.org