



In Memoriam Ramaswamy R. Iyer (1929-2015)

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Rivers have just lost a great voice of theirs My times and trysts with India's Water Wisdom - Prof. Ramaswamy Iyer

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When I first met Iyer Sir in 2008 at a small group meeting in Delhi, I hardly realized I was sitting with a giant figure in India's water arena. I had reached the meeting a little late and introductions were over. The seat next to him was vacant and I still remember his smile looking at me. It was only at tea time that a friend from among the organizers introduced me to him.

I had only read his articles and, habituated as I was to address professors at University with 'Sir', I started likewise to which he was prompt to respond: 'You can call me Iyer.' I never could, till the last email I wrote to him on August 21 this year. Loved addressing him 'Iyer Sir' with respect.

After that meeting in 2008, I had many opportunities to meet Iyer Sir, but we rarely had a one-to-one discussion. Yet I never missed the opportunity to talk to him about my campaigns and ask him questions about some issues. We interacted more from 2010 to 2013. I kept flooding him with email updates from our campaigns and with my articles.

I thought I connected well with him, because in many aspects of water issues I thought the way he had been talking about for decades. He was the one who always would say: 'Rivers have been treated by us (by which he basically meant 'those who are managing our rivers', thereby mostly referring to engineers) as if they were pipelines.' I held this view even before I had read about him and met him, and so became more attracted to him.

Interlinking of rivers

Iyer Sir was a rare breed of bureaucrat. He served at the helm of water resources planning in the country, yet let his heart flow out to the ecological rights of rivers and the riparian rights of communities who lived on and along them. Perhaps that is the reason why he was one of the most dominant voices against the very idea of the Interlinking of Rivers (ILR). His arguments

against ILR have been among the most powerful, logical, scientific, and practical till date. He maintained that,

*'the basic ideas underlying the project to link up India's rivers, namely, the transfer of water from flood-prone areas to drought-prone ones, and from surplus to deficit basins, are completely fallacious. The project envisages upwards of 80 dams and associated reservoirs, each of which will have significant environmental, ecological, social and human impacts and consequences. It will virtually redraw the geography of India.'*¹

On 11 November 2014 India's Water Resources Minister, Uma Bharti, was addressing a parliamentary consultative committee meeting. As she called for fast-track measures to achieve the goal of inter-linking of rivers in the country, Iyer Sir was quick to react. He wrote a plea to the Government and shared it with me and other people working on water issues in the country. I endorsed the document, which was published in the EPW.²

Iyer Sir's words were considered radical to some people working in the sector according to feedback I often received. But his approaches were logical and practical. He was not very optimistic that the Water Resources Minister would listen. Going by the history of our politicians, he was right. But he always asked the people in power to consider proper studies and look at all aspects, socio-economic, cultural, and ecological, before even thinking about such grand ideas that have the potential to tamper with our geography and destroy our river systems to an irreparable extent. So he maintained:

'One does not expect the honourable minister to accept readily the case against the project as stated here. One merely asks her to consider it carefully. Many eminent scholars, thinkers, activists, and so on, have

¹ Iyer, R 2014, *Interlinking of Rivers: A plea to the government*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XLIX No. 50, pp. 16-18.

² Iyer, R 2014, *Interlinking of Rivers: A plea to the government*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XLIX No. 50, pp. 16-18.

*written extensively on the subject. One's request is that the minister should study the literature that is available before a decision of such immense importance is taken.*³

Bharti said that the ILR would give additional benefits of 35 million hectares of irrigation (25 million hectares from surface waters and 10 million hectares by increased use of groundwater). This way, the ultimate irrigation potential would be raised from 140 million to 175 million hectares, and it would generate 34000 MWs of power. This would be apart from the benefits of flood control, navigation, water supply, fisheries, salinity, pollution control, etc.

What she did, and does, not like to discuss is that these projects will displace millions of people and submerge millions of hectares of natural forests in a country that is already fighting high rates of deforestation. Also, that it will contribute to more Green House Gas emissions, create more floods, lead to the death of many rivers, and cause many more related woes.⁴

Iyer Sir was also very upset when the apex court of India gave a judgement on ILR on 22 February 2012. He wrote:

*'The recent Supreme Court decision on two writ petitions of 2002 on the inter-linking of rivers is a deeply disquieting judgment because it is not only a clear encroachment into the executive domain, but also shows an inadequate awareness of the extensive debate on the project. The ruling provides strong backing to a "project" that many hold to be fundamentally flawed and potentially disastrous.'*⁵

He considered it a judicial overreach, a statement I agreed with, as did other key persons and institutions working in water issues in the country. In fact, we all submitted a 'Public Statement on Supreme Court order on Inter Linking of Rivers' requesting the court to "Please Put The Order On Hold and Reconsider."⁶

Rivers as ecological entities

As against grand engineering plans such as the

ILR, I have always argued that India needs decentralized basin restoration, recharging, and management approaches that consider a host of small and medium ecologically sustainable measures involving the participation of local people. Each river is an ecological entity; tampering with her ecology would invite (further) disasters, including dying down of several rivers. There are also enormous socio-economic and political issues to deal with in the case of such a gigantic plan. Iyer Sir did always encourage this viewpoint of mine.

Even though I was in touch with him from 2008, I actually got a chance to interact more in 2010. We had met at a seminar in Pune and discussed directly the conflicts between different groups of water users. I was there to present the case of a conflict arising out of the diversion of water for industries at the cost of irrigation in the Hirakud large dam reservoir. We had just discussed in the seminar the idea of 'entitlements' or 'allocations' and he said he had advocated in some of his earlier writings a particular formula of entitlements. But, on reflection, he said he had become a bit sceptical about this idea.

At that time, the seminar was debating if we could advocate a particular amount for 'water for life' and/or 'for livelihood' and then a host of conflicts were discussed. Iyer Sir expressed doubt, when I raised concerns that there was every chance of the poor getting further marginalized by water allocations in standardized formulae. Iyer Sir shared this view.

We kept debating this through emails, meetings, and in discussions held at the Planning Commission during the formation of the 12th Five-Year Plan.

The new National Water Policy was also debated several times. As apprehended, the Government came up with the idea of 'water as an economic good after a particular entitlement was allocated for basic (basically, drinking water) requirements.' I took a strong position against this idea and feared this would mean extraction and exploitation of water resources at a much faster pace.

³ Ibid

⁴ Panda, R 2014, 'Ms. Uma Bharti, shun the disastrous Inter-Linking of Rivers plan immediately!' Can be accessed at <http://climatecrusaders.blogspot.in/2014/11/ms-uma-bharti-shun-disastrous-inter.html>

⁵ Iyer, R 2012, River linking Project: A disquieting disaster, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XLVIII No. 14, pp. 33-40.

⁶ The statement can be accessed at <http://climatecrusaders.blogspot.in/2012/04/public-statement-on-sc-order-on-inter.html>

Water, not an economic good

I had discussed with Iyer Sir about his viewpoints, while I was writing a critique of the Draft Water Policy 2012. In that paper I argued how the Policy made all the right noises about keeping livelihood and ecosystem needs as the first priority, but contradicted this by insisting that water must be seen as an 'economic good'.⁷

Iyer Sir had a very strong argument against considering water as an economic good and also against the techno-centric approach to manage our water resources. Development needs of humans are now superseding all other needs and that is dangerous for our water resources. So he called for reversing our thinking on this. The point on which I completely agreed with him was when he said: 'The ecology cannot be asked to accommodate development needs. Our visions of development must spring from an understanding of ecological limits.'⁸

He had then known me little better than before. I felt proud when he said he wanted to discuss with me his idea of a National Water Framework Law. And my engagement with him got even better, when he discussed with me while writing a Draft Alternative Water Policy, in response to the Government of India's process to revise the National Water Policy. In this Draft, he incorporated many of my ideas and recognized my contribution as well.⁹ He argued:

*'Instead of trying to make changes in the 2002 Policy, the ministry should put it aside and draft a new policy, starting from first principles. In that context, the draft presented here is an attempt to formulate the kind of document that could be drawn up. It seeks to set forth for consideration a broad national perspective on the nature of water and on its prudent, wise, sustainable, equitable and harmonious use.'*¹⁰

I had written a series of articles in mainstream newspapers and websites advocating such a water policy and asking the Government to have

a long-term vision for centuries rather than a short-term one that seemed to influence its thinking. Each time I shared an article of mine, Iyer Sir would either call me up or send me an email with his inputs, responses, and encouragements.

In an editorial piece of mine published in the Asian Age newspaper I had argued how dangerous it would be to go ahead with the current coal-based energy plans, if we were serious about our water resources. In September 2011, Iyer Sir wrote:

'Thanks. Coal-based power, hydro-power, nuclear power – they are all equally destructive. But why do we need them? The answer you will get is: we need development (8% or 10% economic growth). If you question that you will be labelled as 'anti-development' or 'eco-fundamentalist'. What are the prospects of the world getting off the growth treadmill and rethinking 'development'? Hardly any, I think.'

On this, I was in complete agreement with him, and I have been raising similar issues for long now.

Lending a voice to Mahanadi

The Mahanadi is my Mother River. Each time I met Iyer Sir he used to discuss with me the plight of the Mahanadi. In July 2012, he invited me to speak at the India International Centre, New Delhi, about the river under a dialogue series he had initiated with the title 'Living Rivers, Dying Rivers'. After my presentation and the day's programme, he sat with me for a while and said: 'Panda, I like your passion and fearlessness. Keep defending water.'

He then invited me to write a narrative article on issues and challenges concerning the Mahanadi, followed up with me continuously till I submitted my first draft, and then helped me shape it further.

⁷ Panda, R 2012, 'Water: Economic good or right to life?', February 2012, Available from <http://infochangeindia.org/water-resources/analysis/water-economic-good-or-right-to-life.html>. [15 October 2015]

⁸ Panda, R 2012, 'Water: Economic good or right to life?', February 2012, Available from <http://infochangeindia.org/water-resources/analysis/water-economic-good-or-right-to-life.html>. [15 October 2015]

⁹ Iyer, R 2011, National water policy: An alternative draft for consideration, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XLVI No. 26 & 27, pp. 201-214.

¹⁰ Iyer, R 2011, National water policy: An alternative draft for consideration, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XLVI No. 26 & 27, pp. 201-214.

I feel blessed that I have written a chapter in Ramaswamy Iyer's last book *Living Rivers, Dying Rivers*. A humble and gentle person, but very strong on his perspectives on water issues. I shared many of his concerns, even though my knowledge of water issues in India is far too little compared to this giant. I can call him a Water Wisdom for India, whom the country must remember, recognize, and take help from, if we are looking for a better water future.

To conclude

I feel, like Iyer Sir, that rivers are not pipelines. In the Afterward in his last book, Iyer Sir had written:

*'Consider the things we do to rivers. ('we' refers here to people in general, not any particular group or country.) The flows of rivers are obstructed with dams and barrages; the abstraction/diversion of their waters is regarded as the proper 'use' of their waters; in-stream flows (particularly flows to the sea) are regarded as wasted; in many cases, they are not allowed to flow to the sea; their waters are impounded or diverted, reducing downstream flows, affecting the river regime, harming estuaries, and inducing incursion of salinity from the sea; they are confined within embankments; loops in rivers are sometimes cut through and straightened; rivers are treated as if they were pipelines to be cut, turned and joined; waste, pollutants, and contaminants are inflicted on them far beyond coping capacity; the floodplains of rivers are occupied leaving no space for the accommodation of floods; sand is mined from their beds; bore wells are sunk into their beds for extracting the water below, reducing base flows; and so on.'*¹¹

I am sure no other single sentence has ever been able to describe better than this, the plight of rivers in our times. With Iyer Sir's passing away, our rivers have, indeed, lost one of their profoundest voices.

¹¹ Iyer, R. eds., (2015). *Living Rivers, Dying Rivers*. 1st ed. Oxford University Press, India



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