



# In Memoriam Ramaswamy R. Iyer (1929-2015)

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## Centre vs States

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I first met Ramaswamy R. Iyer at a workshop on the constitutional status of water in Delhi. He was part of a day-long panel discussion, on whether water should remain a state subject or be jointly managed by the Federal and state governments, along with several experts on water. Each presented his view and discussions followed, to which I added my meagre knowledge and views. Iyer's terse observations late into the morning session changed the discourse from water as an inter-state subject to a centre-state subject.

He thought that the Union Government through the new Water Policy 2012 and a Water Framework Law was trying to impose its hegemony on states. Constitutionally, states have decision-making powers over their water resources. The Union Government comes into play in inter-state cases. It only has a role of making overarching policies that states can modify to their convenience. That it does not work like this is another story.

First he gave a quick overview, useful for relative newbies like me, on the multiplicity of ministries trying to grab their share of water – eleven by his count. Then he delved into the merits and demerits of moving water into the concurrent list. He presented an argument in favour – it would give a more holistic water-management approach from the current fragmented one states could provide. He presented an argument against – that it would centralize control over what is after all a 'managed commons' (expression coined by Maude Barlow).<sup>1</sup>

He should know, having been one of more enlightened Secretaries of the Ministry of Water Resources in 1985. As the architect of the first water policy of India, which he drafted as a 'water bureaucrat', his thinking shows a command-and-control approach. This changed 26 years later, when he put together an alternative water policy (2011) that was considered by the Planning Commission but not, strangely enough, by the

Ministry of Water Resources. The Ministry pursued its typically closed-door secretive process of making a Policy and a Draft Framework Law, neither of which has seen the light of day.

The two policies showed continuity and change in Iyer's thinking. In the 1987 policy he was the unabashed bureaucrat:

*'Water should be made available to water short areas by transfer from other areas including transfers from one river basin to another, based on a national perspective, after taking into account the requirements of the areas/basins.'*<sup>2</sup>

Water, in that view, was a resource to be controlled and used. He showed an enlightened approach, though, by bringing in basin-level planning, addressing environmental concerns and prioritizing drinking water in allocation.

The policy sounded like a collection of intentions, good and contentious ones. It was also the first time anybody had tried to quantify India's water resources, however rudimentary these calculations were (and still are).

### **In the 2011 version, he stated:**

*'Water comes from, and is dependent on, the ecological system. Ecological concerns and imperatives must therefore govern all planning and action relating to water at all levels and scales. It is the duty of both the state and the citizen to ensure the protection, preservation and conservation of all water sources and of the larger ecological system of which these form a part.'*<sup>3</sup>

To be fair, this was an extension of the 1987 document, but that policy treated water as a resource to be managed and used for human

<sup>1</sup> National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians, a citizens' advocacy organization with members and chapters across Canada and a vocal proponent of water as a fundamental right

<sup>2</sup> Central Ground Water Board (CGWB), 1987, National Water Policy, India

<sup>3</sup> Iyer, R 2011, National water policy: An alternative draft for consideration, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XLVI No. 26 & 27, pp. 201-214.

purposes with the environment being almost an after-thought. This changed substantially in 24 years. Environmental considerations occupied more mind space, so, continuity and change.

Another enunciation on water use also highlights continuity and change. In water allocation (1987), drinking water topped the list. In 2011 he expanded this to Water For Life and Livelihoods, going beyond just drinking water.

This also reflects the changes in thinking among the water intelligentsia over the years. From a resource, water became a matter of public trust to be held by the state for citizens; it became a common pool resource.

This seems like fluff at one level, word play to manage and control water, a natural resource, for human purposes. But, in 2011, Iyer was much more nuanced than in 1987. Unfortunately, wisdom of hindsight does not always translate into policy. As a Secretary he wielded much more clout in shaping how India (mis)manages water than as an independent water expert in 2011. He noted as much in the 2011 document:

*'The starting point of this document is the recognition that a radical rethinking on water has become necessary because there has been serious mismanagement of water in this country, leading to a near-crisis. That there has been serious mismanagement of water will be clear from the following brief, selective, illustrative enumeration of problems....'*<sup>4</sup>

There was some discussion how water availability was worked out in 1987. It was a 'back of the envelope' calculation or a guesstimate. The rainfall data was kind of accurate, but groundwater and surface water resources were an educated guess. This educated guess still forms the base of India's water planning, Iyer's lasting legacy. The Central Water Commission uses these figures with minor modifications. To be fair, while he had access to data on river flows, aquifers in India were mapped much later.

He was clear-headed about who should manage water in 1987: it was the government for the people. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments find mention in the 2011 version, shifting the prerogative to people's institutions:

*'PRIs and nagarpalikas must be enabled and empowered to perform their constitutional role in relation to water by the necessary financial provisions, staffing and capacity-building. They will then be concerned with local water 'governance' in all aspects. These must include local water augmentation, economy in water use, avoidance or resolution of conflicts, protecting water sources, ensuring water quality, preserving local knowledge and traditional/cultural systems and practices relating to water, and so on. All such local water-related activities must be guided by a sensible combination of local, traditional knowledge on the one hand and modern knowledge and good professional advice on the other. While the preservation of traditional knowledge, wisdom and culture is important, negative features of the past, such as social injustices, exclusions, and discrimination, need to be avoided.'*<sup>5</sup>

Iyer's thinking on water management changed in other ways also. In particular his views on large water projects such as dams. It took over a decade and into retirement age for him to turn from being a proponent, if a cautious one, to an opponent of large dams. He said in *Water: Perspectives, Issues and Concerns* (Sage 2003):

*'What brought about this change? Several factors: increasing awareness of the kinds of impact...; a better understanding of the limitations of EIAs; exposure to difficult and critical questions in seminars.... However, it was my membership of two project-related committees that caused a significant shift in my position: (i) the Five-member group that went into various issues raised by the Narmada Bachao Andolan in relation to the Sardar Sarovar Project and submitted two reports ... and (ii) the Expert Committee on the Environmental and Rehabilitation Aspects of the Tehri Hydro-Electric Project.'*

That was not to say he had become an anti-dam crusader, but he had significantly altered his position and taken a nuanced view on large water management projects.

This was the Iyer I saw at the workshop. Nuanced, but with effective arguments for each nuance. As honorary research professor with the Centre for Policy Research for the last several years, he

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Central Ground Water Board (CGWB), 1987, *National Water Policy, India*

wrote articles and books, and gave lectures on improving water resources. One theme was treating water as a resource rather than an input, as the government had been wont to do. Another was propagating basin-wide integrated approaches with both human and environmental concerns at the centre.

From there on he considered water as a living resource, in the last book he edited *Living Rivers, Dying Rivers* (Oxford University Press 2015). Here, rivers are a living resource, not just any old resource. He turned a strong critic of the engineering approach to handling water, through pipes, pumps, and plants rather than through the broader approach of a water expert who looked at water from ecosystem and human angles.

This also reflected how most outside the government would view and treat water: not as a compound created for meeting human needs and pleasures, but as something fundamental to nature and human existence.

Iyer consented to be on the steering committee for the Water Community of Solution Exchange, of which I was a resource person for nearly five years. In the occasional meetings, he gave us the benefit of his vision that water was not merely for human consumption. Water was a global resource and humans were only a part of the picture. They were the most problematic part having altered the nature of water in most of the world's rivers, and having polluted oceans and groundwater.

In talks after these meetings he was hesitant to comment on the policies of the government of the day. He expressed his comments through his writings rather than verbalize them.

Iyer still commanded the respect of serving bureaucrats, though he had been retired for several decades.

It is easy to be wise in hindsight, but I say this gladly of Ramaswamy Iyer. He was honest to admit in writing that his views had changed (for the better) several years after retirement and after close interactions in the field. As a Secretary he had inhabited a rarefied world that required no first-hand interaction with the masses. Relying on junior staff and engineers shaped his thinking as a serving bureaucrat. That he changed substantially at an advanced stage in life does him great credit.

Wouldn't it be wonderful, though, if serving

bureaucrats changed their world-views as they climb the ladder, at an early enough age?



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