



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 dissenting voice in the water sector

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Let me begin this brief tribute to Ramaswamy Iyer on a personal note. I had known him for more than two decades or so mainly through his writings and some occasional meetings at workshops and conferences. But I came to know him a little more closely through the work of the Forum for Policy Dialogue on Water Conflicts in India (the Forum, in brief).

The Forum, a network of more than 250 individuals and organizations, mainly drawn from civil society and the academia, has been in existence for the last ten years or so. Ever since its formation in 2004, Iyer had been a friend of the Forum.

He contributed to the development of the Forum in many different ways: as a member of its Advisory Committee, as an author in its first major publication¹, as a peer reviewer of many Forum publications, as a resource person in its training programmes, and as a participant of national level workshops, conferences, and dialogues organized by the Forum.

I would say he was their most proactive Advisory Committee member. He greatly enjoyed participating in their workshops and conferences, because he found them very relevant in terms of policy and practice as also academically rigorous and stimulating. He used to look forward to them. When there was a gap between two workshops, he used to check with me when the next one was going to be. The last major programme of the Forum he participated in was a one-day consultative meeting on 3 December 2014 in Hyderabad on the issue of water sharing between Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

I should like to mention here specially that he never refused me, except for the last one when I invited him as a resource person for a training programme on 'Water Conflicts in India: Legal and Institutional Framework for Conflicts Prevention and Resolution'. The Forum was organizing it for legal professionals in collaboration with the National Law University,

Delhi, in the last week of October 2015.

Though he agreed first, he later withdrew. This was mainly for two reasons: one, his health and two, the release of his new book *Living Rivers, Dying Rivers*, scheduled to take place in the first week of November by the Vice President of India. He told me he wanted to concentrate fully on the book release without any distractions. Unfortunately when the training programme was taking place in Delhi, he was in hospital. Though I was in Delhi for three, four days, I regret not visiting him; I did not know he was critically ill.

In the recent past I got two opportunities to work closely with Ramaswamy Iyer. One was when he asked me to be a member of the working group set up to draft the Water Framework Law as part of the preparation for the 12th Plan. He headed the working group. The second was when Janakarajan and I took the initiative to organize the felicitation conference to honour and celebrate his contribution to the water sector. Both these opportunities were not only great learning opportunities for me, but were also opportunities to know Ramaswamy Iyer as a person. I was very impressed by his systematic way of handling things, his clarity of thinking, and, more than anything, his eye for detail.

In each of our lives there are a few people who influence us greatly and who shape our worldviews. In my life there have been a few such people greatly influencing me, my way of thinking, and especially in shaping my viewpoints around water. K. R. Datye, S.A. Dabholkar, Vilasrao Salunkhe, Suhas Paranjape, and my activist friends in the movement are some of them. To this small list I would humbly add Ramaswamy Iyer's name, for my association with him over the last ten years or so has helped me sharpen my understanding of water in general and water conflicts in particular.

Voice of civil society

Often Ramaswamy Iyer has been described as an eminent scholar, activist, and policy-maker, all

¹ Gujja, B., Paranjape, S., Goud, V., & Vispute, S. 2008. *Water conflicts in India: A million revolts in the making*. New Delhi: Routledge.

rolled into one. After his retirement from bureaucracy as Secretary, Water Resources, he became the voice of civil society, very often countering mainstream thinking with alternative ideas, concepts, and viewpoints. His was a dissenting, sobering voice in the water sector.

Most of us were (and are) depending on his works to say what we want to say on water sector issues. He was like a peg, where civil society could hang its ideas, as he gave more respectability to them.

As Ramaswamy Iyer himself agreed, the journey from bureaucrat to activist-scholar had been a long and continuous one. To quote him:

'When I was appointed as Secretary Water Resources in June 1985, I brought a fairly conventional frame of mind to the job, but started learning from the first day. Within two months I knew enough to feel that a major change was called for, and that as a first step a national water policy was necessary. I initiated the process that culminated in NWP 1987, a very imperfect though pioneering document. By the time I retired from the Government my thinking had changed considerably, but the learning process was far from complete. It continued beyond my retirement, and is still continuing.' (From Iyer's speech during the felicitation function organized in his honour on 25 November 2013 at the India International Centre, New Delhi.)

His participation in committees on Sardar Sarovar Project and the Tehri dam was a transformative experience for him. He regarded this participation a significant step forward; it contributed a great deal to his learning and transformation. In fact, he credited that experience for his gradual shift from a 'balanced stand' on the issue of large dams to the position of 'no large dam' (he never took a complete 'no dam' position).

As Iyer indicated, the shift in his position was 'partly the result of two major movements against the adverse impacts of large projects, one against the Sardar Sarovar Project and the other against the Tehri Hydroelectric².

He was very closely associated with many NGOs, popular movements, and activist organizations as a friend, adviser, board member, and

sympathiser. Notable among them are the Narmada Bachao Andolan, Centre for Science and Environment, Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, Navdanya, Tarun Bharat Sangh, VIKSAT, Foundation for Ecological Security, South Asia Network of Dams, Rivers and People, the Forum for Policy Dialogue on Water Conflicts in India, and the Arghyam Trust. He was one of the founding members of the Indian Society for Ecological Economics. He was the chairperson of the Organising Committee and moving spirit of the India Rivers Week 2014, held in Delhi in November 2014. He was also part of the Centre for Policy Research for nearly three decades.

A true public intellectual

Apart from the many books he wrote, he made use of the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) and The Hindu as the main carriers of his insights and views on a wide range of issues in the broader area of environment and development. Of course, within this, water and environmental governance –policies, laws, and institutions– occupied the prime place.

He responded quickly with his incisive analysis to contemporary issues and new developments in the water sector – be it a policy initiative of the government, a court judgement, or an unfolding water conflict.

He was a true public intellectual. Unlike many policy analysts in the country, he was not afraid to take a stand, whether it was the Sardar Sarovar Project, the Cauvery interstate water dispute, the Mullaperiyar dam conflict, or the inter-linking of rivers.

Though his services were called upon many a time by the central government, especially when it would find itself in troubled waters over transboundary rivers, the water establishment of the country never took Iyer's contributions seriously. Neither was his contribution recognized. So he was happily surprised, when he heard of the decision to give him a Padma Shri in 2014. Nevertheless, when the government informed him about it, he checked with a couple of his close friends, whether he should accept it or not. A concern that agitated him greatly was, whether accepting this award would amount to compromising his independence. This he did not want to do at any cost.

² Iyer, R. R. 2013. The story of a troubled relationship. *Water Alternatives*, 6(2), 168.

An alternative world view around water-environment-development³

As we all know, Iyer's writings on water-environment-development cover a wide range of issues. Even if we take a quick review of what he wrote over the last three years, we see that he was concerned with rivers as such, the inter-linking of rivers, water conflicts and disputes like the Mullaperiyar and Cauvery, transboundary water issues between India and its neighbours, the Water Framework Law, the Alternative Water Policy, a proposed amendment to the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation & Resettlement Act 2013, environmental clearances, the report of the high-level Committee for reviewing environmental laws, and so on.

The issue of healthy and living rivers had always been a passion with him. It prompted him to anchor a lecture series on India's rivers – an initiative of the India International Centre in Delhi, later converting that into a book (Living Rivers, Dying Rivers, (ed.), Oxford University Press 2015).

He wrote:

'... rivers are treated as if they were pipelines to be cut, turned and joined; waste, pollutants and contaminants are inflicted on them far beyond their 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 flow reducing base flows; and so on....The engineer (or some engineers) would like to control and manipulate rivers; the economist (or the economist of a certain persuasion) regards rivers, and water in general, as a 'resource' to be fully exploited for human use, and also as a commodity subject to market force. Neither view leaves room for thinking of rivers as living things, as ecological systems, as having roles to play beyond serving human economic activity, and as having an existential and not merely an instrument value.' (pp. 436-437)

Through some of his recent articles, especially 'Environment and Development: Some Thoughts for the New Government'⁴, 'A Development Manifesto'⁵, 'Against Developmental Fundamentalism'⁶, and 'A hasty, half-baked report on environment'⁷, he took on some of the initiatives of the new government at the Centre, which were seen by many as 'setting the clock back'.

His cryptic comment, 'Dramatically faster environmental approvals is bad news, not good news', in a way sums up his overall take on the government's efforts to speed up environmental clearances for various infrastructure projects.

He was deeply disturbed by these developments after the BJP-led government had come into power at the centre.

Iyer's work has come to symbolize an alternative worldview of the water sector. His writings have been a dissenting voice against the mainstream attitude to water. The alternative water policy he wrote⁸, brings together all his concerns about the water sector in a very comprehensive and integrated manner. According to him: '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.' (p. 201)

He tried to give a legal framework to the alternative water policy through the working group he headed for the Planning Commission to draft a Water Framework Law for the country. As expected, the water establishment did not take kindly to either: the ideas in his alternative formulation of a water policy did not find a place in the 2012 National Water Policy, and the Water Resources Department appointed the Alagh Committee to draft another Water Framework Law!

His work on an alternative water policy and a water framework law not only provided a critique of the current scene, it also provided a vision of

³ This section draws heavily from Janakarajan & Joy, 'Ramaswamy R. Iyer: A Tribute', *Economic & Political Weekly*, 26 September 2015, Vol. L, No. 39

⁴ Iyer, R 2014, *Environment and Development: Some Thoughts for the New Government*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLIX No. 25, pp. 19-21.

⁵ Iyer, R 2014, *A development Manifesto*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLIX Nos. 43 & 44, pp. 25-26.

⁶ Iyer, R 2014, 'Against developmental fundamentalism', *The Hindu*, 30 May.

⁷ Iyer, R 2015, 'A hasty, half baked report on environment', *The Hindu*, 13 February.

⁸ Iyer, R 2011, *National water policy: An alternative draft for consideration*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLVI No. 26 & 27, pp. 201-214.

what is possible. For there is a need to look for alternatives to the current situation to form a concrete vision of what can be. This is one of the fundamental lessons we can learn from Iyer.

Transboundary and inter-state water conflicts

Iyer has written extensively on India-Pakistan, India-Bangladesh, and India-Nepal relations on river water sharing. He was also an active participant in several 'Track-II' initiatives to promote understanding, good relations, and constructive cooperation between India and Pakistan as well as between India and Bangladesh.

His views on unresolved inter-state disputes in India are widely appreciated. In particular, he had shown a tremendous enthusiasm to resolve the long-standing Cauvery water dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, and the Mullaperiyar conflict between Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

He offered a constructive support for the Track-II initiative in resolving the Cauvery water dispute. Though the Government of India notified the final award on Cauvery water sharing, Iyer was convinced it would be rather difficult to operationalize the award unless Karnataka's strong sense of injustice would be assuaged.

So he proposed a voluntary, mutually agreed adjustment that consisted of:

- i) a voluntary offer by Tamil Nadu (TN) of 20-30 Thousand Million Cubic Feet more water to Karnataka;
- ii) Karnataka agreeing to adhere to the monthly schedule of releases; and
- iii) a formula for sharing in distress years, to be worked out by the 'Cauvery Family'⁹ or, failing that, by the Cauvery Management Board¹⁰.

Iyer consistently argued for the application of the Precautionary Principle in the case of the Mullaperiyar conflict between Kerala and Tamil Nadu, since there was no agreement among experts on the safety of the dam and 'the remote

contingency of arisk (in this case dam breaking) actually materializing is unacceptable'.

He felt that the intervention by the Supreme Court was a definite case of judicial overreach, and the issue of dam safety needed to be settled by a joint expert committee, appointed by both states or the Inter-State Council¹¹.

His views on both the Cauvery and Mullaperiyar invited the ire of some fringe elements in Tamil Nadu, because they thought his views were against the interests of the State.

Looking at the functioning of Inter State-Dispute/Tribunals, Iyer argued they should go beyond adjudication, which is divisive, and should function as conciliation committees exploring negotiated settlements. For this, according to him, the composition of the Tribunals needed to be changed; making them composite bodies consisting of persons of different disciplines presided over by a judge¹².

To spread his ideas: the best tribute civil society can give

I think the best tribute civil society can give is to spread his alternative ideas and viewpoints on water-environment-development and try to re-orient both policy and practice. This is important because the establishment would not take note of his contribution, though his contribution to the water sector discourse in India over the last three decades has been unmatched.

Not only that, some people at the helm of affairs in the water sector have been pretty vicious in their attack on him.

It is with this background that many of our friends in civil society and the academia, especially after learning about Iyer's passing away, wrote to both Janakarajan and me that the felicitation conference was the best gift that we could have given him.

For the last few years both of us had been thinking of organizing a conference 'to felicitate, acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of

⁹ A Track-II initiative of the farmers of Karnataka and TN by Prof. S. Janakarajan and Madras Institute of Development Studies

¹⁰ Iyer, R 2013, *Cauvery dispute: A lament and a proposal*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLVIII Nos. 13, pp. 48-53.

¹¹ Iyer, R 2014, 'Mullaperiyar: A matter of judicial overreach', *The Hindu*, 16 May.

¹² Iyer, R 2013, *Cauvery dispute: A lament and a proposal*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLVIII Nos. 13, pp. 48-53.

Prof. Iyer to the water sector'. But we were a bit diffident, because we did not know how Iyer would respond to it. When we finally approached him with this idea it took him by surprise and he took a couple of days to respond. Then he wrote us a longish email to say yes and why he was saying yes.

He wrote:

'I long ago ceased to expect any external or formal recognition. I am not anxious for honours and distinctions. What I do want is effectiveness. I would like people to pay some attention to what I say. I would like to leave some imprint on public policy. I thought at one stage that formal external recognition of some kind might improve my effectiveness. Well, that is not going to happen. Against that background, the kind of recognition that your effort might bring me is very welcome. That was why I did not demur to your proposal'

The three day conference, 'Water Sector in India: A Critical Engagement – Felicitations conference in honour of Prof. Ramaswamy R. Iyer', was held on 25-27 November 2013 in Delhi with support from the Centre for Policy Research and the Arghyam Trust. It brought together academics and activists from the water sector across the country.

The tremendous response the conference received was an indication of the respect and love Iyer commanded in the water-environment-development sector.

Seldom did we see an emotional side of him. But the conference and the felicitation in the presence of the Vice President of India, Dr. Hamid Ansari, was one such occasion when he very emotionally admitted that 'this is the best recognition I could ever get.'

I am very happy that I could play a small part in this and consider it as one of my most satisfying moments in life. The felicitation conference was supposed to be the beginning of a collective, long-term engagement with Iyer's ideas. It is the responsibility of all of us to take his ideas forward and critically engage with them.

The Forum will try whatever it can to spread Iyer's ideas. As a first step Janakarajan and I are giving final shape to a felicitation volume. Our only regret is that we could not bring this out when Iyer was alive. Also, the Forum would try to consolidate all his writings on water conflicts into

a book. We hope to get both these out before his first death anniversary.



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