



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

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## At the threshold between living and dying Book review of *Living Rivers, Dying Rivers*\*

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What constitutes the entirety of a river? Is it a conduit to transfer water? Does it also include the life teeming around it? Attention of the current Indian government towards the condition of the Ganges River has brought the issue of rivers into the spotlight. But do we know what is actually happening to Indian rivers? Do these rivers match the idea of what we think a river should be? Are they living or dying?

The journey of exploring different perspectives on the rivers of India began through a series of talks titled 'Living Rivers, Dying Rivers' at the India International Centre in Delhi. The book *Living Rivers-Dying Rivers*, with 22 chapters written by 25 authors on different rivers of India, was then brought together and edited by the late Prof. Ramaswamy R. Iyer.

The authors in this book follow no specific format of writing; each brings their own style and background into effect. Together, this has created a mosaic of academic rigour and storytelling along with a touch of activism, all aimed to educate, raise concern, and stimulate action.

The book does not cover all rivers of India. One can't even say it only covers important rivers or the largest rivers. It is, rather, a mixed bag of chapters on various rivers without giving importance of one over the other. In addition, the book also includes chapters on overarching themes that supplement this discourse.

The sequence of chapters, as explained by Prof. Iyer, is not arbitrary or based on priority. Rather, it is following an imaginary journey across India. It begins from the river of the national capital, moves on to the national river, to proceed northward to the Indus, then eastward to the North-East. Thereafter it travels southward through the states, where, after Tamil Naidu, it turns towards the west coast of Kerala, to move up north, completing the journey in Gujarat.

So, what is a river? The description of rivers across the chapters in this book all show an agreement that rivers are more than just a resource to be

tapped and tamed. They are dynamic living beings, organisms that shape, give and carry life in and off the river. But there are no two alike rivers, each has unique characteristics and dynamics. Indian rivers do have one thing in common, though: they are all suffering currently.

For the tale of most rivers outlined here is a sad one, like the choking of the Yamuna through pollutants from the cities and industries or the amount (a whopping INR. 1612.38 crores) already spent on revitalization of the Ganges—to no effect. The constant strife of water-sharing across states in the north, south, east, and west is another tale of woe.

This book also brings out the dichotomy between rivers being revered and worshiped and being indiscriminately polluted and harnessed as an economic good. Each tradition linked to rivers is tied and dedicated to share knowledge of its quality and to remind of its floods. The book reflects on how we have misplaced these values and traditions when it comes to 'developing' rivers.

The great Indus Basin is now one of the most depleted river basins in the world. Of the Jhelum River, its largest tributary is in a precarious state. Similar trials are shared of the rivers of the North-East, springing from the Brahmaputra and the Barak. For instance, many forget that the Brahmaputra is also home to the endemic Gangetic Dolphin, which is endangered by changes in water quality and by human interferences.

Considered one of the holiest rivers, the Bagmati that used to flow and spill through Bihar, is now being re-shaped for human convenience and consumption through dredging and damming.

Another aspect that emerges from many chapters is India's colonial legacy that is influencing its present course on managing rivers. The colonial approach of harnessing, regulating, and damming rivers is still followed. This legacy is borne by multiple rivers that

\* Iyer, R. eds., (2015). *Living River dying River*. 1st ed. Oxford University Press, India, pp. 500, (Price - £34.99)

crisscross West Bengal from the Ganges to the Brahmaputra, the Teesta, and the Hubli, to name a few. The Mahanadi that runs through Odisha and Chhattisgarh, marketed as a water-surplus basin, shares this fate of wretchedness. The main consequence of these practices is that once perennial rivers have now become seasonal, and many others have disappeared.

Have you ever associated feminine characteristics with a river? One author mentions how language shapes our references, associates life and gives a gendered dimension to rivers. The communities living on the banks of Godavari talk of how she comes (floods) and goes (droughts), likening “River as a feminine presence” (pg.219).

What kind of distinction is it to be the third most polluted river in the world in 1996? The River Palar in Tamil Nadu had received this honour, and matters have not fared better since. We fail to realize the massive and spread-out economic impact that pollution causes, from increased migration due to loss of livelihood, to poisoning of fertile land, water, and air.

#### **'A river needs to flow for its survival'**

*'A river needs to flow to ensure our survival as well'*  
(pg. 284)

What may be said about rivers that have stopped flowing? The forested catchments of the Western Ghats feed the rivers of five states, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, with a dependent population of around 245 million. These Ghats include Periyar, Cauvery, Krishna, Bhīma, Tungabhadra, and Godavari as well as hundreds of perennial rivers, which are quickly disappearing. But changing land-use patterns, sand mining, and damming are showing severe consequences. The entire Western Ghats region now has about 2,250 dams.

At a small point this book allows us to take heart: the situation is not all bleak. There are still some pristine rivers in the Ghats that are actively protected such as the Shastri River in Maharashtra, and the Aghanashini and Bedthi in Karnataka

An ever-growing need for clean drinking water and electricity has been increasing abstraction and infrastructure development on rivers. These have led to strong reaction from various communities. Who has not heard of the Narmada Bachao Andolan? But Narmada is not the only river that faces damming in Gujarat, for mega projects are a standard fixture on its 185 rivers.

Further, how can we forget interlinking of rivers? Many chapters here paint a vivid landscape of its dire consequences.

Does that mean all rivers are dying and nothing is happening? Each chapter here does include measures needed for reviving rivers. Among others, this would necessitate a shift towards interdisciplinary action, universal participation, along with basin-wide information and data sharing/exchange system. In addition, effective and transparent governance, regulation, and monitoring of the rivers is said to be essential.

In the Afterword, Prof. Iyer points out that our reference to rivers has changed over the years. Previously associated with words like revered, scared, wild, and gushing, they are now referred to by terms such as controlled, training, resource, regulated. This difference has changed how we interact with and are becoming alienated from our rivers.

The sad picture of the state of rivers in India that the book paints is irrefutably true. But it would also have been nice, if the book had included positive and constructive examples of protection and restoration of rivers. Some hope is needed to move ahead in reviving our dying rivers, for they are not dead yet!

The takeaway question now is –What are we going to do to bring life to our dying rivers?



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