

Ramaswamy R Iyer

A Tribute

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Ramaswamy R Iyer was a civil servant but he was constantly posing questions to accepted wisdom on issues relating to water. His body of work and frequent interventions on matters of public policy relating to water came to represent an alternative view that lays stress on efficient use, respect for the environment and finding solutions to water conflicts. Officialdom had no use for him but his imprint on how to think about water will be permanent.

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Ramaswamy R Iyer, an eminent scholar, activist and policymaker, former secretary to the Government of India and then Honorary Professor with the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, illuminated our understanding on water, ecology and environment:

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... 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.

This statement by Iyer during a felicitation conference organised in his honour in November 2013 in New Delhi succinctly illustrates his journey from a water bureaucrat to a people and environment-centric water-activist-cum-researcher. The pages of *Economic & Political Weekly* (EPW) and the *Hindu* bear this out as he had made these two academic/popular media forums the main carriers of his insights into a wide range of issues pertaining to water and

development, ecology, environment and livelihoods.¹ He was a true public spirited activist-intellectual. He was exceptional among the policy analysts and academics in the country for, he was never afraid to take positions, be it the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP), Cauvery interstate water dispute, Mullaperiyar dam conflict or the issue of interlinking of rivers (ILR). Though his services were called upon many a time by the central government, especially when it found itself in troubled waters over trans-boundary rivers, the water establishment of the country never took Iyer's contributions seriously; nor was his contribution recognised. So he was happily surprised when he was informed of the decision to bestow the Padma Shri on him in 2014.

It is not as though he became more sensitive about water- and environment-related issues only after his retirement. In fact his contributions as secretary (water resources) to the Government of India were quite seminal in scope and substance. First and foremost, he was the one who brought into being the National Water Policy (NWP) for the first time in India in 1987. It was instrumental in generating a good deal of public debate, critical thinking and awareness among all sections of population cutting across disciplines and backgrounds.

Subsequent to his retirement, he provided active service either as a chairman or as a part of many committees constituted by the central government on

water- and environment-related issues. A few important positions were member of the Committee on the Pricing of Irrigation Water set up by the Planning Commission (report submitted in 1992); chairman of the Working Group on Participatory Irrigation Management set up by the Planning Commission for the formulation of the Ninth Five Year Plan in 1996–97; member of a committee (“Five Member Group”) which studied the controversial SSP on behalf of the Ministry of Water Resources in 1993; member of a high-level expert committee to review the environmental and resettlement aspects of the Tehri Hydroelectric Project (1996–97); chairman of the Task Force on Natural Resources, Environment, Land, Water and Agriculture, set up by the Commission on Centre–State Relations in 2008–09.

Around 2010–11, on a request from the then Prime Minister he wrote a White Paper on the working of the Indus Water Treaty and submitted it to the government in a draft form. Meanwhile, the political circumstances changed and the Government of India was no longer interested in publishing the White Paper, and hence his draft is languishing in a file somewhere.

Iyer regarded his participation in the committees on SSP and Tehri Dam as a significant step forward which 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” (of course he never took a complete no dam position). As Iyer himself has indicated in an article he wrote in 2013, 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 hydroelectric” (“The Story of a Troubled Relationship,” *Water Alternatives*, 2013).

During the last three decades of his life he travelled widely across the globe to participate in hundreds of conferences and workshops and published so extensively in the form of books and numerous articles.²

He maintained a close association with many non-governmental organisations

(NGO), popular movements and activist organisations as friend, adviser and sympathiser. Notable among them were 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, the Forum for Policy Dialogue on Water Conflicts in India, Arghyam Trust and so on. He was part of the Centre for Policy Research for nearly 25 years.

An Alternative World View

Ramaswamy Iyer’s writings on water–environment–development cover a wide range. He published extensively on water policy, interstate water disputes, linking of rivers, water conflicts, trans-boundary water treaties concerning India and its neighbours like Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and China. His recent writings on a water framework law, an alternative water policy, the aborted amendment to the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013 and the High-Level Committee for Reviewing Environmental Laws have contributed significantly to making the debate more informed.

Healthy and living rivers were a passion for Iyer and that was what prompted him to anchor the lecture series on India’s rivers—an initiative of the India International Centre, Delhi—and later converting them into a book (*Living Rivers, Dying Rivers*, (ed), Oxford University Press, 2015). He writes:

...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 436–37).

Some of his recent articles, “Environment and Development: Some Thoughts for the New Government” (EPW, 21 June 2014), “A Development Manifesto” (EPW, 1 November 2014), “Against Developmental Fundamentalism” (*Hindu*, 30 May 2014), and “A Hasty, Half-baked Report on Environment” (*Hindu*, 13 February 2015) have attempted to critically evaluate some of the initiatives of the new government at the centre which were seen by many as “setting the clock back.” Indeed, his cryptic comment, “Dramatically faster environmental approvals is bad news, not good news,” in a way sums up his overall perspective on the new government’s efforts to speed up environmental clearances for various infrastructure projects.

Furthermore, Iyer’s work has come to symbolise an alternative world view of the water sector. His writings have been a strong dissenting voice against the mainstream policies and perspectives on water. The alternative water policy that he wrote (“National Water Policy: An Alternative Draft for Consideration,” EPW, 25 June 2011) brought together all such dissenting concerns. He also tried to give a legal framework to the alternative water policy through the working group he headed in 2012–13 for the Planning Commission to draft a Water Framework Law for the country. As expected, the water establishment did not take it seriously—the ideas in his alternative NWP did not find a place in the 2012 NWP and the Ministry of Water Resources appointed another committee headed to draft another Water Framework Law!

Cauvery Dispute

Ramaswamy Iyer had strong views on the Cauvery water dispute. He was convinced that even though the final award on the dispute had been declared in 2007 and later notified by the Government of India, operationalising it would depend upon allaying Karnataka’s strong sense of historical injustice meted out to them. For this, Iyer proposed a voluntary, mutually agreed adjustment that would consist of (i) an offer by Tamil Nadu of 20 to 30 thousand million cubic feet (TMC) of more water to Karnataka; (ii) Karnataka

agreeing to adhere to the monthly schedule of releases; and (iii) a formula for sharing in distress years that would be worked out by the “Cauvery Family” or failing that, by the Cauvery Management Board (“Cauvery Dispute: A Lament and a Proposal,” *EPW*, 30 March 2013). The more important point however was that the Interstate Water Disputes Tribunals should go beyond adjudication to 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 judge.

Beyond Water

Ramaswamy Iyer was as passionate about music as about water which may not be known to many. He was a good commentator on Indian classical music—both North and South Indian music. Iyer, though a permanent resident of Delhi, never failed to participate in Chennai’s December music festival as a listener and as a writer. Nothing could come in the way. In fact when we approached him to get a slot in December for the felicitation conference in 2013 he made it very clear that December was out as it was reserved for the Chennai music festival. He was also a regular contributor to a music journal called *Shruti* which carried many of his comparative perspectives of South Indian and North Indian music. It is unbelievable that he has published 24 articles on music between 1983 and 2010.

Felicitations Conference

Though his contribution to the water sector discourse in India over the last three decades or so was unmatched, it did not go down well with the water establishment of the country perhaps because his clear-cut views and unambiguous statements loaded with facts did not toe the establishment’s line. It was against this background that we thought of organising a felicitation conference “to honour, acknowledge and celebrate” his contributions to the water sector. In fact, when we approached Iyer with this idea he took a bit of time to respond to our

proposal and finally wrote to us a longish email explaining why he was saying yes. He wrote,

I long ago ceased to expect any external or formal recognition. ...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. ...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 conference, “Water Sector in India: A Critical Engagement—Felicitations Conference in Honour of Prof Ramaswamy R Iyer,” held in November 2013 brought together academics and activists engaged in water sector all across the country. The tremendous response the conference received was an indication of the respect and love Ramaswamy Iyer commanded in the water–environment–development sector. Seldom did we see an emotional side to Iyer. But the conference and the felicitation at the hands of the Vice President of India, Hamid Ansari, was one such occasion when he very emotionally admitted “this is the best recognition I could ever

get.” The only regret we have is we could not bring out the *festchrift* volume when he was alive. Ramaswamy Iyer left us rather abruptly.

NOTES

- 1 Around 2013–14 Ramaswamy Iyer had drawn up an ambitious plan of consolidating the vast material that he had with him—especially the articles and reports that he prepared from time to time—and bringing them out as books over the next three years. The books he planned included *Living Rivers*, *Dying Rivers*, *Water Disputes, Conflicts and Controversies*, *Working of the Indus Water Treaty*, *Evolution of National Water Policy: 1987 NWP to 2012 NWP* and the large collection of writings on subjects not related to water like on the Election Commission, Reservations for OBCs, IIMs, the nuclear issue, CAG, constitutional and legal articles, and so on. Of these, he was able to bring out *Living Rivers*, *Dying Rivers* though the planned release function on 3 September 2015 could not be held because of his ill health. It would be a fitting tribute to him if we can collectively make efforts to bring these books out.
- 2 He has an astounding number of publications. To be brief, he has published nine books (including those edited by him) of which five relates to water; he has 23 articles published on social justice, politics, literature, culture and philosophy; 64 articles on public enterprises and public administration, economic policy and governance; 197 articles on water and environment; 24 articles on music—most of them all published between 1983 and 2015.

Journal Rank of EPW

Economic & Political Weekly is indexed on Scopus, “the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature,” which is prepared by Elsevier NV (<http://tinyurl.com/o44sh7a>).

Scopus has indexed research papers that have been published in EPW from 2008 onwards.

The Scopus database journal ranks country-wise and journal-wise. It provides three broad sets of rankings: (i) Number of Citations, (ii) H-Index and (iii) SCImago Journal and Country Rank.

Presented below are EPW’s ranks in 2014 in India, Asia and globally, according to the total cites (3 years) indicator.

- Highest among 36 Indian social science journals and highest among 159 social science journals ranked in Asia.
- Highest among 36 journals in the category, “Economics, Econometrics and Finance” in the Asia region, and 36th among 835 journals globally.
- Highest among 23 journals in the category, “Sociology and Political Science” in the Asia region, and 15th among 928 journals globally.
- Between 2008 and 2014, EPW’s citations in three categories (“Economics, Econometrics, and Finance”; “Political Science and International Relations”; and “Sociology and Political Science”) were always in the second quartile of all citations recorded globally in the Scopus database.

For a summary of statistics on EPW on Scopus, including of the other journal rank indicators, please see <http://tinyurl.com/qe949dj>

EPW consults referees from a database of 200+ academicians in different fields of the social sciences on papers that are published in the Special Article and Notes sections.