

Water Sector in India: A Critical Engagement
Felicitatation conference in honour of Prof. Ramaswamy Iyer
25-27 November 2013, New Delhi

**Speech by Prof. Iyer at the Felicitatation Function on 25 November
2013**

Hon'ble Vice-President of India Dr. Hamid Ansari, Dr. Mihir Shah, Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Dr. A. Vaidyanathan, Mr. K. J. Joy, Dr. Janakarajan, distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very grateful to K. J. Joy and S. Janakarajan for the trouble that they have taken to organize this function and the conference, to CPR and Arghyam for the support that they have extended to that initiative, and above all to the Hon'ble Vice-President of India Dr. Hamid Ansari for elevating this occasion by his gracious presence. On an occasion of this kind, it is not easy to strike the right note in response. One has to avoid the twin dangers of a smug acceptance of felicitations and an ostentatious exhibition of humility. I hope that I do not fall off the tight rope.

When my friends Joy and Janakarajan mentioned this initiative of theirs a few months ago, my initial reaction was one of a slight discomfort. For a moment I thought of requesting them to drop the idea. However, I decided not to do so for a reason that I should like to explain.

From time to time I have had the feeling that I am mostly preaching to the converted, and that the people who read my writings or come to my lectures are mainly those who are predisposed to agree with me. I have received assent and approbation from NGOs, academics, activists, and parts of the media, but there has generally been little or no response from the Water Establishment. It was only after Dr. Mihir Shah became a Member of the Planning Commission that there has been some slight receptivity in official circles to what I have to say. Against that background, when Joy and Janakarajan proposed a felicitatation

conference and a festschrift, I overrode my modesty and agreed, prompted by a faint hope of enhanced receptivity. If a few more people read me as a result of this conference, and if the Water Establishment becomes slightly more willing to listen to me, I shall be very gratified.

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.

In that prolonged process of continuing education, I have benefited greatly from my association with many people and institutions, both within and outside the government. The names are too numerous to mention here, and to acknowledge only some might be invidious. Nevertheless, taking that risk, let me make special mention of a few: R. Rangachari, B. G. Verghese, Dr. Ajit Mozoomdar, Dr. A. Vaidyanathan, the late Prof. T. N. Narasimhan, and Himanshu Thakkar. For the rest, let me say a general "thank you" to all those with whom I have had occasion to work, or share platforms in seminars and conferences, or discuss the issues that I was grappling with. All those exchanges and discussions have been of immense help in my pursuit of understanding and clarity. I must also thank the newspapers and journals, in particular *The Hindu* and *Economic and Political Weekly*, for the ready publication of my writings.

I have been associated with the Centre for Policy Research for the last 23 years, and much of my work has been done at CPR. I must acknowledge with thanks the immense support that I have received from CPR. India International Centre has also played an important part in my life, and I am grateful to IIC for its support, particularly of the Programme 'Living Rivers, Dying Rivers', which is

now taking the form of a book. The Planning Commission, and in particular Dr. Mihir Shah, provided several opportunities for good work through Steering Committees, Working Groups and Sub-groups, and by commissioning a paper. Arghyam and the Water Conflicts Forum of SOPPECOM are two other institutions with which I have had a long and useful association.

I must mention my personal involvement in non-official initiatives to find a way out of the vexed and intractable Cauvery Dispute. I consider my informal membership of the 'Cauvery Family' initiated by Dr. S. Janakarajan to be among the most important experiences of my life. My informal association with certain civil society institutions, NGOs, popular movements and campaigns, has also broadened and deepened my understanding of issues and problems.

I have also learnt much from my association with the Foundation for Ecological Security, Anand, as a member of the Board of Governors for several years, and as Chairman of the Board for a short period. Finally, I must thank Winrock International India for supporting a research project which took me on field visits to Sukhomajri, Alwar, Ralegan Siddhi, Hivre Bazaar, Ahmadnagar, Bangalore, Madurai, Purulia and other places, in the year 2000-1.

In conclusion, without any hypocritical pretence of indifference to felicitation, let me say quite frankly how very happy and exhilarated I am at this function and the related Conference. It is indeed a shot in the arm and will lift my flagging spirits. Thank you very much indeed.
