

Towards Water Wisdom: Limits, Justice and Harmony

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Holding Alternate Vision

The catastrophe and crisis of water management has been a known fact in India reflected in persistent water scarcity and droughts in many rural and urban locations. Apart from the issue of resource management, the predicament lies in having lack of ideas on how exactly water should be managed. *Towards Water Wisdom* is a contribution towards this discourse taking into account, the inherent limit of the resource and from the lens of justice for individuals and in harmony with nature.

The book is divided into six sections. The first section deals with the water scene in India through the lens of looming water crisis and presents the alternative view. The author critiques the mainstream view of water management as the crisis of water availability looking at the increasing demand due to urbanization and industrialization. The answer of the mainstream view lies in supply side management to create water infrastructure. Iyer redefines the 'crisis' as gross mismanagement and rapacity. The interrelated threads for Iyer are water governance which is constituted by water policy and management principles. The mainstream views of water governance, according to the author, have led to 'high-handed, violent and cruel aspects to those who face displacement /loss of livelihood and delayed and badly flawed rehabilitation' (pp 29). An alternative view is to use a mix of supply and demand side management with emphasis on community led and controlled augmentation as first resort while big dams, long distance water transfers projects as last resort to solve water crisis.

The second and third section maps water conflicts including river water disputes. These disputes ranges from inter-country rivers Treaties such as Indus and Baglihar (between India and Pakistan) to inter-state treaties such as Cauvery (between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu), The Punjab Water Imbroglio (between Punjab and Haryana) and 'other' kind of conflict between developmental plans of the state and the livelihood and rights of the people in the Narmada valley. The larger question that Iyer asks is the gross mismanagement of water resources of the rivers and issues of inequity in resource distribution that are subservient to the politics of nations and states. On the conflicts of 'other' kind, Iyer challenges the notion of 'development' on the basis of sustainability, justice and equity and calls for adopting more humane and enlightened policies on displacement and rehabilitation.

The fourth section observes the inadequacies of water laws and policies of India and maps the perplexities of ownership of water between the State and the community. The argument is that 'the economic rights of some must not be allowed to endanger the fundamental rights of others' (pp 161).

The fifth section presents national water concerns in other South Asian countries. At the international/global level, it deconstructs several notions and prescriptions currently in vogue, and takes note of significant new thinking. Finally, the author widens the perspective beyond water to the total water management. The facets of water wisdom, according to the author, is responsible use of the scarce water resources, reasonableness towards other users and understanding the effect of actions especially towards the poor and marginalized. This responsibility encompasses restraint, sense of justice and moral obligation and comes close to the concept of *dharma*.

Written in a lucid language, the book is interesting and simple to read and comprehend. The arguments are straightforward and sharp. Coming from a person who served as Secretary of Water Resources for the Government of India and within his tenure worked on shifting the Ministry's attention from big projects to resource-policy issues, the book is an account of his wisdom on water and related issues generated over time. The only critique goes to the editor of the book for not having suggested longer chapters (some chapters end in just two pages) and the sections may have had more sharp opening and concluding paragraphs that summarizes what is going to come in the section and the main conclusions, for the readers. In a rare combination of a person who worked as career bureaucrat and academician later, the book is an exceptional combination of his experience and is refreshing for its alternative perspective and wisdom.