



Nature Is Not A 'Free Gift'

Ravi Agarwal

LIVING RIVERS: DYING RIVERS

Edited by Ramaswamy R. Iyer

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Professor Ramaswamy R. Iyer unfortunately passed away on the eve of the release of this book, late last year. His writings have helped reshape and deepen our understanding of rivers as well as of water. In this final offering of his long list of journal articles and books on the issue, he presents a wide ranging, voluminous edited volume, which brings together, for the first time, some of India's best water thinkers, academics and activists (p. 25) to methodically trace the state of the most important river systems across India. The title Living Rivers, Dying Rivers, itself 'embodies' rivers, infusing them with life, reimagining them from being mere hydrological water channels to living socio-cultural and biological entities.

The book details what ails our rivers and river systems today. It also suggests remedies, a reminder that the ex-bureaucrat author continued to be highly respected in policy and activist circles. Not only are most of our rivers polluted, not many are 'living', and as the author concedes, and the few that are 'might not remain living' much longer. The problems include rampant industrialization and urbanization of flood plains, unsustainable water extraction and use, failure of pollution abatement plans, misplaced flood control measures like embankments, privatization, large dams and irrigation schemes, and deforestation, amongst others. At the very root of this kind of ill-treatment lies a basic lack of understanding of the complex ecology of river systems, and their being considered merely as fragmented water channels.

Spanning a national river geography, this book is refreshingly not a top-down view. It is a ground-up reflection through the eyes of those who are locally engaged. Each chapter offers a detailed account of the reasons a particular river system is in decline. Two very important discussions are about the Ganga and the Indus. Restoring the Ganga is a priority of the current Government (with even a new Ministry dealing with it), besides the holy city of Varanasi (one of the polluting hotspots) being the constituency of Prime Minister Modi. The river is discussed in detail over three separate chapters. Rama Rauta in 'The Ganga: A Lament and A Plea', Vinod Tare and Gautam Roy in 'The Ganga: A Trickle of Hope' and N.C. Narayanan in 'The Ganga: Pollution Abatement Strategies: A Review of GAP and Emerging Institutional Models', write about the need to make an aviral (flowing) and nirmal (pure) Ganga especially in the light of a failed Ganga Action Plans (GAP). They lay out an institutional critique, and even outline a step by step short and long term plan for its restoration. In effect they make a case for a more locally rooted and less ecologically damaging developmental model in order to restore the river.

The Indus, one of the largest river basins in the world, on the other hand, flows between India and Pakistan in a contested geopolitical terrain. Shakil A. Romshoo, offers a rare and detailed analysis of the Jhelum basin in 'The Indus System: Changing Environment In The Jhelum Basin'. The third major river system in North India is the Brahmaputra and its basin. Flowing through China into India and Bangladesh, in recent years there have been concerns about the damming of the river upstream in China as well as in India, and its downstream impacts. The basin is fed by a complex network of rivers, which span the seven States of North East India, besides Bangladesh. Chandan Mahanta and Lalit Saika (in 'The Brahmaputra and Other Rivers of the North-East') document in detail this relatively unknown ecology, with its 'contributions to livelihood, culture and biodiversity, which is changing rapidly owing to new urbanization, population growth and erosion. Manoj Mishra's 'Yamuna: An Extreme Case', asks the very important question, 'what is a river?' and answers it not academically, but through his on-the-ground-navigation of the length of the river. Himanshu Thakkar's 'The Narmada and Other Rivers of Gujrat' is another account from someone who has had a long engagement with the iconic Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). It offers alongside a critique of the much touted Sabarmati riverfront development, as well as the fantastical idea of the interlinking of rivers.

The book then turns its attention to the issue of floods through the rivers in Bihar (Dinesh Kumar Mehta, in 'Embanking Rivers: The Bagmati in Bihar'), the river systems in Bengal ('Rivers of West Bengal: Dying, Living' by Kalyan Rudra), rivers in Central and West India ('The Mahanadi: A Great River in Distress' by Rajan Kishor Panda,' Living and Dying Rivers of the Western Ghats' by Pandurang Hegde and 'Endangering A Heritage: Rivers of Maharashtra' by Parineeta Dandekar) before turning to the southern rivers ('River as a Feminine Presence: Godavari in Andhra Pradesh' by R Umamaheshwari, 'In Search of a Living River: A Journey Across Tamil Nadu' by S. Janakarajan and 'Between the Living and the Dying: Rivers of Karnataka' by Latha Anantha). In 'Cauvery In Death Throes', Leo F. Saldanha and Bhargavi S. Rao speak of a river which has been the center of an ongoing bitter water-sharing dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

The final section of the book offers a framework to help understand the reasons for such a state of affairs. Kunta Lahiri-Dutt's 'Towards A More Comprehensive Understanding Of Rivers' raises fundamental epistemological questions about the historical location of the nature/culture binary and the trap of understanding rivers through a conventional geomorphological lens. Rivers are not merely uniform identical physical systems which are in a state of constant equilibrium, but, as the author argues, unique and ever changing. A second contribution by Manoj Mishra ('A Law to Protect Our Rivers') suggests an outline for a new proposed law currently under discussion (though painfully slowly)—the River Zone

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Regulation (RZR) by the government. The book is appended by the Delhi Declaration on Rivers, which was adopted by the first ever India River's Week, an extraordinary event held in Delhi (2014 October) by a group of environmental organizations under Ramaswamy Iyer's guidance, and attended by over 100 water activists from all over the country.

One can be greedy and expect more from such a book which effectively critiques the ongoing reductionist technical and institutional discourse around rivers. Arguably this discourse can to be broadened, by offering more details alongside on other aspects of rivers such as their socio-cultural and biotic life. For example, the flora and fauna of the Indian river systems, or the impact of water quality on marine life has not been written about much, and highlighting these could encourage new understandings. In some countries, such ecological information has impacted public discourse and policy and even resulted in projects such as dams and barrages, (for example, which prevent upstream movement of spawning fish), being modified or shelved altogether. Similarly the cultural significance of our rivers is important, as these are lived realities.

While reading the book, one cannot but help think of the recent Chennai floods, where a major cosmopolis went 'underwater'. In past years, Mumbai, Delhi and Srinagar all have been submerged by urban rivers. As river beds, wetlands, marshes, erstwhile ponds and lakes have been rampantly urbanized, it begs the question if the rivers are at 'fault' or if we have simply transgressed their boundaries. This book provides ample food for thought and some answers. Such a book emphasizes that the issue of water has become prime and rivers are central to this debate. It reminds us that these are complex ecological systems, which are not only about an economy of resource use, but also about biodiversity, faith and mythology. As part of global water cycles, they are vulnerable to climatic changes and global warming. Historically engineers have played a dominant role in determining their futures. This has roots in early nineteenth century industrial Europe when rivers like the Rhine were hammered into 'straight' navigable water channels. Such ideas pervade our water policy to this date, as many experts still consider water flowing into the sea as 'wasted'. The trajectory of a techno-economic modernity has erroneously assumed nature to be a 'free gift.' It is imperative that for a sustainable future, nature needs to be included in our social contract. Unshackling rivers is not only about letting them flow freely, but it is also about unshackling ourselves from our narrow understandings of ecology and nature. The book is a final appeal by an extraordinary man who understood water extraordinarily.

Ravi Agarwal, an engineer by training and founder director of the environmental NGO Toxics Link, which has pioneered work in waste and chemicals in India and campaigns on conserving the river and the forest in Delhi, serves on several high level policy committees, and writes extensively on sustainability issues in journals and books. He is also a visual artist and curator working with photographs, video and public art. His works have been shown very widely nationally and internationally, and is also in several private and public collections.

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