Prof. Ramaswamy R. Iyer is venerated among people working in the water sector in India today. Many owe a debt to Prof. Iyer for generously sharing his time and his wisdom to help shape their thoughts on water. His work has come to symbolise an alternative world view of the water sector. Moved by a desire to honour this guide, the Centre for Policy Research, Delhi and Arghyam Trust, Bangalore organised a felicitation programme and three day conference titled 'Water Sector in India: A Critical Engagement' from the 25th to 27th of November, 2013 in New Delhi. Hon’ble Shri M. Hamid Ansari, the Vice President of India, was the chief guest at this programme. Other dignitaries who paid tribute included Dr. Mihir Shah (Member, Planning Commission of India) and Prof. A. Vaidyanathan (Eminent Academic).

Prof. Ramaswamy R. Iyer, formerly Secretary, Water Resources, in the Government of India, was the principal architect of India's first National Water Policy published in 1987. He has served as a member of several high level committees for the Government of India besides assisting several international organizations including the WB, UNDP and IWMI in a consulting capacity. Prof. Ramaswamy Iyer has also contributed a great deal as an academic, particularly in the field of water and environment. His research contributions by way of presentations, papers and books on water have generated keen interest and debates in India and abroad. Some of them include ‘WATER: Perspectives, Issues, Concerns’; ‘Towards Water Wisdom: Limits, Justice, Harmony’; ‘Water and the Laws in India’.

Prof. Iyer's writings have been a dissenting voice against the mainstream attitude towards water. The alternative water policy, and the working group he headed for the Planning Commission to draft a water frameworks law for the country are only two examples of the many instances where he spoke out against the 'establishment view'. His work on the alternative water policy not only provided a critique of the current scene, but also provided a vision of what is possible. Ms. Rohini Nilekani pointed out that the way water discourse is being polarised is not good for the country. While Prof. Iyer is a dissenting note, we can learn from his attitude and his generosity towards those he disagrees with. There is a need to look for alternatives to the status quo in order to present a concrete
vision of what can be; this is one of the fundamental lessons we can learn from Prof. Iyer.

In the words of K J Joy, the goal of this meeting was to 'To felicitate, acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of Prof. Iyer to the water sector and use this opportunity to take a look at what is happening on different water-related issues in India.' The conference featured multiple paper presentations by professionals and academia falling under the wide umbrella that is the water sector in India. Broad themes discussed were Water in the 12th Plan, Data in the water sector, the Gender and Water Nexus, Himalayan Rivers, Environmental Flows in India, Water Quality, Groundwater, Water Conflicts in India, Transboundary Water and Water Governance, Urban Rain Water Harvesting, Water Regulatory Bodies, Water Footprints, Water and Sanitation, Changing Land Use in India, Dams and Environmental Clearances and Climate Change and Water.

Much focused discussion also took place around the Draft National Water Framework Law and suggestions to be sent to the Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR). The conference attendees drafted a resolution recommending that both, the Draft put forth by the Iyer sub-group and that of the Alagh committee be made easily accessible in local languages and in the public domain for review and comments. The resolution observed that the Water Framework Law has serious implications for ecosystems as well as the lives and livelihoods of the people in the country and therefore there must not be a rush to finalize it, with at least a year ideally to be provided for feedback. An effort must also be made to seek the opinions of NGOs, CSOs, People’s Movements and academia at various levels before the Law is passed.

The 12th Plan has adopted the devolution of water management to citizens and the participatory process, as its guiding principles. The recognition that all wisdom does not reside in government alone, and that it is the power of partnerships that need to be put forward, is a sea change in the way the government formulates its Five Year Plans. The 12th Plan for the first time saw all working groups headed by people outside the government.

The Planning Commission also recognised other principles. That water must be recognised as a multi-dimensional and a multi-disciplinary issue. Water management must invoke the best minds, the best practice and the best knowledge. Crucially that government policy should be deeply informed by all that is happening on the ground. To make a reality, the government is now looking at providing incentives to get people to move towards the direction of devolution as opposed to command and control. The 12th Plan has endorsed an approach that looks at devolution and sustainability. The policies are in place, the funds are in place, but the struggle is far from over. What is now awaited is yet more earnest work on the ground by people seeking a sustainable water sector in India.