

Water: The Looming Crisis in India (AsiaWorld)

By Binayak Ray



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Water: The Looming Crisis in India analyzes the key issues in developing national freshwater policies for the mainland countries of the South Asian subcontinent. Ray suggests that freshwater policy must cover all aspects of physical environment and human life, by noting that food and drought management are parts of freshwater policy and acknowledging that water is a scarce natural resource and has economic value. He calls for the development of basin-wide policies to minimize conflicts within riparian countries, as well as a freshwater policy baseline to minimize internal conflicts on water sharing arrangements. By pointing out the need for full participation of all stakeholders in developing a baseline policy including people displaced by the construction of large dams, Ray suggests a new system in which riparian countries are guaranteed that no water-related project proceeds without a transparently developed environmental impact assessment and evaluation of alternative options.



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Editorial Review

Review

For some time now, the prospect of water scarcity has been an issue of growing international concern, but one which governments, globally and particularly in the Indian sub-continent, have been reluctant to address. Increasingly, however, the social and economic impacts of water shortage are becoming apparent, and their longer-term implications for domestic and international security are attracting attention. Binayak Ray's book provides a timely examination of the major features of the looming crisis in the sub-continent. Drawing on his considerable experience as a bureaucrat, an aid official, and a scholar, Ray details the emerging problems in historical and contemporary context, and discusses appropriate policy responses. His study makes a valuable contribution to debate on this important topic. (Ronald J. May, Centre for Conflict and Post-conflict Studies, Asia Pacific, Australian National University)

This is an outstanding piece of scholarship by Binayak Ray in exploring one of the most important issues facing civilized society everywhere. Providing secure supplies of potable water is now of central concern to all societies and made the more so aswe face climate change and try to determine what our adaptive response should be. The lessons Ray has drawn from experience in developing freshwater policy in India may be applied in almost all countries. The problems of cross-boundary aspects of regionalwater demands, the political complexity of reaching accommodation with competing jurisdictions, the stresses created when supplies cannot keep up with demand due to population increase and increasing per capita consumption, the importance of environmental considerations and the constraints on financial resources are all issues faced in varying degree by nations large and small. The path dependencies created by the political boundaries and institutional arrangements as well as the prevailing technology and the cultural values and behavioral norms all affect the ways in which societies address the current water crisis. Ray's study is a model we should use in trying to understand and then resolve the problems arising from the provision of freshwater sup (Patrick Troy, Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University)

As water use and water shortages increase throughout the world, India is in danger of water famine, and increasing water conflicts both within India and between India and its small and large neighboring countries. Already drought and floods affect millions of people annually. In this context, Binayak Ray has given a harsh but carefully documented critique of India's water policies, their irresponsibilities and their failures to consider environmental and human impacts. Readers will find it an excellent survey and particularly useful on the hastily conceived river interlinking project, and in terms of international relations. Ray urges both increased stakeholder involvement within India and a South Asia- (and China-) oriented regional approach as remedies for a sustainable and just water policy. (Gail Omvedt, School of Social Justice, University of Pune)

This book is an important contribution to the ongoing debate about the looming freshwater crisis in the Indian sub-continent, one of the driest sub-continents with the largest poverty-stricken population on earth. The non-availability of freshwater will have disastrous socio-economic and political consequences, as well as create unprecedented environmental catastrophes. Further, the rise of China, which controls about 90 percent of Asia's freshwater supply and is a water-scarce country herself, will demand more water from two of the Himalayan rivers that flow through the sub-continent. As no two Asian superpowers have ever existed side by side, the rise of India as an economic superpower will complicate the situation further. Within this context, the book deals with a range of issues which India and other sub-continental countries must bring into their policy considerations to ensure sustainable socio-economic development and political stability in a rapidly changing global environment. I commend the author for professionally addressing these issues and recommend the book to anyone concerned with water and environmental issues. (Prema-chandra Athukorala,

College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University)

This is a very valuable contribution on water policy in India and is of relevance to many other countries around the world. The sustainability of water resources is a critical issue for all of us as we prepare for the widespread and yet to be identified national and local impacts of population growth and climate change. This book leads the way with a forward looking and planning approach in assessing the need for wise water use and conservation in India. However, the lessons and recommendations are of wide relevance and usefulness and this book signals the importance of effective water policy and planning. Water sustainability is critical to our future well-being and this book is a timely reminder that we ignore national water management at our peril by pointing to a better way. I sincerely congratulate Mr Ray for an outstanding contribution on this subject. (Bill Robertson, chairman, Terralink International Limited)

Ray has produced a comprehensive treatment of all these aspects of the internal as well as extraterritorial issues. He rightly emphasizes the need for a holistic approach that should lead to long-range policies capable of addressing the concerns of all stakeholders and of meeting the demands of sustainability. The intersecting nature of the issues dealt with has, as usual, thrown up a lot of dust, but he has picked up a clear path amidst the haze. Such a conspectus was badly needed, and Ray's performance is marked by both scholarship and elan. (Sisir K. Sen)

This is an outstanding piece of scholarship by Binayak Ray in exploring one of the most important issues facing civilized society everywhere. Providing secure supplies of potable water is now of central concern to all societies and made the more so as we face climate change and try to determine what our adaptive response should be. The lessons Ray has drawn from experience in developing freshwater policy in India may be applied in almost all countries. The problems of cross-boundary aspects of regional water demands, the political complexity of reaching accommodation with competing jurisdictions, the stresses created when supplies cannot keep up with demand due to population increase and increasing per capita consumption, the importance of environmental considerations and the constraints on financial resources are all issues faced in varying degree by nations large and small. The path dependencies created by the political boundaries and institutional arrangements as well as the prevailing technology and the cultural values and behavioral norms all affect the ways in which societies address the current water crisis. Ray's study is a model we should use in trying to understand and then resolve the problems arising from the provision of freshwater supplies, whether the problems are within and between the regions in one country or raise trans-boundary issues. Ray's work is grounded in a detailed analysis of the situation in India, but its ambition is justifiably painted on a larger canvas. Ray has made a singular contribution to the debate and his book deserves to be closely studied by all those who have a concern for the environment and for the peaceful management of tensions arising from the exploitation of the limited supplies of freshwater. (Patrick Troy, Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University)

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College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University)

At a time when world attention is fixed on China's numerous and complex water problems, Binayak Ray reminds us in this wide-ranging indictment that the problems facing Asia's other giant are no less numerous, no less complex, and no less intractable. If anything, the greater salience of contested international waters in South Asia makes India's problems of even greater regional and world significance. Ray also stresses that, as elsewhere, a water crisis is almost always a reflection of underlying institutional and policy crises. (James Nickum, Asian Water and Resources Institute, Tokyo, Japan)

This highly specialized study focuses on a crucial but largely ignored problem facing the whole world, but more acutely underdeveloped countries....The book will be greatly useful for policy makers and planning agencies dealing with natural resources and environment. Recommended. (*CHOICE, February 2009*)

About the Author

Binayak Ray is a visiting fellow in the department of political and social change at Australian National University.

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