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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Mainali, Mohan P.</td>
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<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/1257">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/1257</a></td>
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Politics Of The Water Resources

By

Mohan P Mainali
Politics of the Water Resources

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Background

The Nepali press which has a history of about a century is still an infant in terms of technology used and professionalism. There are more than 550 registered newspapers but most of them are either irregular or published to prove their regularity in the eyes of government, not the readers.

Various factors have contributed to lead to the present situation. The press has spent 52 years under a virtually closed Rana regime and another 30 years under Pahchayat system when basic human rights were denied. During 1951-1960 there was press freedom in Nepal to some extent. Full freedom of the press came only after the peoples movement of 1990.

The freedom of the press is essential but not the ultimate answer for upgrading the state of the press. The political freedoms backed by a sound economy can be a long term answer.

What resources exist also has not been tapped. The press has not been able to improve quality of publication which has made it difficult for them to sustain on advertisement and subscriptions alone. There are however, some exceptions.

Environmental Reporting

Environment and development reporting in Nepal is not new phenomenon. As environmental problems are directly related to lives of general the people, the press has been reporting the local problems such as deforestation, water resources, natural calamities before the idea of 'conserving' environment have to be imported from the West and environment became politicised. After the revolution of 1951, the number of newspapers had increased and hence the environment coverage was also in increased. However, there has been new trend in environmental journalism in the recent years.

In general, the Nepalese media - national or regional-are more conscious of local, national as well as some international environmental problems. Because of the global trend and training and seminars on environmental reporting organised by national as well as international organisation the media seems to be rethinking their roles regarding the need to report and write on environment and development issues.

Newspapers

NEFEJ's media coverage survey shows that, although deforestation was one of the issues that received maximum coverage, newspapers have not neglected other problems like soil erosion, landslide, flood, environmental sanitation, diseases, man and wildlife interaction,
potable water, waste management, unplanned urbanisation, impact of industrialization as well as environmental problems worldwide including issues of major concern: warming up, ozone depletion etc.

Radio

The Radio Nepal - the country's only radio station is getting more are more involved in environment sector. But its programme are sponsored by other agencies. It does not have programmes of its own on environment related issues.

Television

Nepal Television, also the only TV station in the country, depends heavily on the programmes produced abroad. But this situation is improving. It seems that it is more aware of the environmental problems and its role of educating people. The NTV programmes have covered topics like environment in historical sites, birds, wildlife, hydel energy, watershed management, mountain ecology, forest, solid waste disposal, air, water, and environmental problems created by tourism.

Environmental reporting is not as easy as political reporting. It is difficult to get information on any issue right at hand. So there is lack of indepth reporting in Nepalese media. Besides, the problems prevailed in the field of journalism also effect the reporting on environment.
Politics of Water Resources

Even though Nepal has not benefited much from its hydroelectricity potentials, set to be one of the highest in the world, (of which only 0.28 per cent is utilised) and capacity of its more than 6000 rivers to irrigate 65,00,000 ha. of land (Nepal has only 38,00,000 ha. of cultivatable land), the politicians right from the Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher to the present day political leaders have exploited the water resources to the maximum extent for their vested interests. Rana Prime Minister in exchange with water of Nepal’s Mahakali river got IRs. 50,000 and 4,000 acres of Sal Forest in India from East India Company in 1920. In 1954, leaders of Nepali Congress used it as an instrument by means of which it overthrew its Prime Minister Matrika Prasad Koirala with whom its second leader B.P. Koirala had conflict in the matter of power. During 1951-60, the period of Nepal’s experiment with parliament democracy, every political power (mis) used water resources. The Panchayeti regime was also clever enough to (mis) use the issues against democracy. Now it has once again become a political hot cake whose implications are likely to influence the votes in the forthcoming elections.

Nepal’s Water Resources

Nepal is the second richest country in the world in its hydroelectric power potential, Brazil being the first. Out of its hydroelectric power potential of 83,000 Mw, 25,000 Mw is technically and economically feasible. But Nepal has utilised only 0.28 per cent of its hydro power potential. Ninety five per cent of Nepal’s total energy demand is met by traditional resources thus accelerating the process of deforestation. The Nepal Electricity Authority, the monopolistic seller of electricity in Nepal, has recently been forced load shedding.

Exceeding the 38,00,000 ha. of total cultivatable land in Nepal the present water resource capacity can irrigate 65,00,000 ha. of land. Till now 38,00,000 ha. of land in India and 9,32,000 (including traditional and modern system) in Nepal is being irrigated. This figure may go down because the capacity of canals has been reduced due to negligence.

Rana Prime Minister Chandra Samsher first established a power plant namely Pharphing in Kathmandu with the capacity of 500 Kw in 1911. It was established to provide additional luxury to the ruling Rana family. The same Prime Minister had signed an agreement on Sarda in 1920 with British India to utilize common water resources mutually though Nepal got only negligible share and the British empire naturally got maximum benefit. It was the first agreement between Nepal and any other country on water resource.
Nepal, which mainly depends upon agriculture, has utilised its water resources from the time immemorial in traditional ways. But it was Chandra Samsher who established improved irrigation system by constructing Chandra Canal in Eastern Nepal in 1926 which had the capacity of irrigating 13,000 ha. of land.

As it has been mentioned earlier the abundance water resource of Nepal has yet to be utilised for the well being of the people of Nepal and India.

Agreement on Sarda Barrage

Three years before the signing of the treaty between Nepal and East India Company in which British India accepted Nepal as an independent sovereign country in 1923, they reached an unequal agreement on the utilisation of water of the Mahakali River. Nepal handed over its right of using water of Mahakali to the British for which Chandra Samsher was awarded IRS. 50,000 and 4,000 acres of Sal forest. British Raj in India was gone, Rana rule in Nepal was overthrown, but India still has sole rights to use water of the Mahakali. When Nepal initiated Mahakali Irrigation Project in 1970, it was allowed to use only 400 cusec of water under the old agreement:

Agreement on the Koshi Barrage

Introduction

The Koshi, one of the three main rivers of Nepal used to displace thousands of people in Bihar, India and in Nepal, too. In fact, it was regarded as sorrow of Bihar. Each year—when it was free—the Koshi used to change its course dramatically and swept away the villages and farmlands in Bihar. Towards the end of British Raj in India, the idea that the victims of Koshi’s disaster could be saved by controlling it and otherwise dangerous water could be used to irrigate thousands of acre land in India (and Nepal) that lay barren and to produce power which could accelerate economic development in India and Nepal, came to the mind of rulers in India.

For this purpose India sought permission from Nepal to carry out an investigation on the Koshi. Roy Bahadur Pawan Khosala, the president the Central Water Irrigation and Navigation Commission came to Nepal in 1946 to get permission from Nepal government which he got immediately. Following this, Geological Survey of India and the Central Water Irrigation and Navigation Commission carried out an investigation. On the basis of the interim reports of the investigation, Secretary of Mineral Resources and Construction, submitted the Koshi plan to the Indian Legislative Council in 1947.
But it was only after 1953, when Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited the Koshi hit area in Bihar that the real scheme of controlling the Koshi was designed. On 25 April 1954 General Mahabir Shamesher, Minister for Planning Development and Land reform of Nepal and Guljarilal Nanda, Minister for Planning of India signed the agreement on the Koshi in Kathmandu. This agreement was between Nepal 'state government' and 'union government' of India. India constructed two canals (Eastern and Western) with total capacity of 22,500 cusec which irrigates Indian land. The eastern canal (capacity of 45.3 cusec) built above about 40 Km from the Koshi barrage was meant to irrigate farmland in Morang and Sunsari in Nepal. The Koshi project was supposed to produce 20,000 Kw of hydroelectricity which has not materialised. Besides, the Koshi project was supposed to take measures to control the Koshi’s flow.

Protest Against the Project

Though it was not the first Nepal-India joint venture to utilise water it was the first which was criticised severely by Nepali politicians and the press.

The government of Nepal was accused of surrendering before Indian pressure. It was said that Nepal was cheated in the matter of sharing of the benefit of the project. There was no voice against the measures taken to control the river.

Contrary to the general belief that only Communists of Nepal protested against the agreement, leaders of Nepali Congress criticised the Koshi agreement. Nepal Pukar, official organ of Nepali Congress criticised the government for being unable to get benefit from the project. Late B.P. Koirala in his article published in Nepal Pukar wondered about the process of the discussion held between the two countries before they reached an agreement. He wrote on “The decision on the agreement made within 2/3 days is a matter of doubt.”

"Nepal should benefit as much as possible from any project built in Nepal. But the Nepal government lacked this Nationalistic Policy.” he concluded.

Interestingly, B.P. Koirala after about two month of his first article opposing the Koshi Agreement was published, reached the conclusion that "As far as the Koshi agreement is concerned no one protest the agreement which is beneficial to both countries."

Rishikesh Shah, the then General Secretary of Nepali Congress and Ganesh Man Singh (now Supreme Leader of Ruling Nepali Congress) strongly criticised the agreement. Leaders of Gorkha Parishad also protested against the agreement.

The Nepalese press too criticised the government on the Koshi
agreement accusing the government of not taking stand on issues of sharing benefit from the project, though there were some papers which blindly supported the agreement.

The protest against the Koshi agreement was not baseless. The opposition group protested against the government on the basis of the dam proposed to be constructed in Chatara about 40 K.M. above the present barrage which they claim would benefit Nepal much more than now. In fact, the report submitted to Indian legislative council by Secretary of Mineral Resource and Construction Department, India proposed the dam and power house in Chatara.

When there was strong protest against the Koshi agreement Matrika Prasad Koirala, the then Prime Minister of Nepal, made it clear that it was the geological factor not Delhi or Kathmandu that decided the project site.

The Koshi Project: Ex.pection and Reality

To minimise the effect of protest against the Koshi agreement Indian Minister for Planning Guljarilal Nand in a press conference in Kathmandu after signing the agreement, Balkrishna Gokhle, the then Indian Ambassador for Nepal in his press statement and the Koshi project through advertisement tried to assure Nepali People that the project could be beneficial to both countries. Mr. Nanda said the project could irrigate thousands of acre of land in Nepal and the electricity produced from the project could be incentive to establish industry in Nepal. Thousands of people could be saved from the devastation of the Koshi.

They told Nepalese people a fascinating story. But any project based on incomplete data could not be as straight as it was drawn by planners in plain paper. The same principle applies to the Koshi project, too. The original plan of producing electricity was abandoned thereby cancelling the chance of hypothetical electricity based industrialisation of eastern Nepal. The project executer was compelled to do so because it was impossible to build power house because of high level of siltation found in the Koshi.

The other benefit shown by Indian authorities was irrigation facility. But the Chatara Canal (which is renamed as Sunsari-Morang Irrigation Project) which was supposed to irrigate thousands of acre of land in Sunsari and Morang, has created various problems because of the high level of siltation. The project was compelled to search for the dumping site where silt from the canal could be stored. "Unequivocally, the level of the realization of potential in this Koshi project is the lowest among the irrigation projects of India." Concluded I.J. Thapa in Himal.

Has the Koshi Project provided relief to the people living near the Koshi river as it was claimed? Anyone who remembers last year's flood in the Koshi will not need not an answer. Last year 50,000
Nepali people in Saptari were affected by the Koshi. The Koshi would have swept away many villages downstream, had there been rainfall in the Koshi catchment area just after the Koshi crossed its western 400 metre embankment in Hanuman Nagar. 1,50,000 people in Saharse and Madhubani districts of Bihar were also affected severely. Do the people of India and Nepal have the right to ask the successor of Guljarilal Nand and Mahabir Shamsher the question that is the Koshi project beneficial to the people of India and Nepal (it has instead proved to be beneficial to the corrupt bureaucrats and politicians of Bihar)?

The Gandak Agreement

Various activities by politicians and mass media were organised against the Gandak agreement reached between India and Nepal. Former Prime Ministers Tanka Prasad Acharya, Dr. K.L. Singh, Ranga Nath Sharma, Keshar Jung Rayamajhi, Shambhu Lal Shrestha criticised the government for planning the Gandak agreement.

However, the Gandak agreement was signed on December 4, 1959 between Nepal and India. Though the project intended to benefit both countries equally it was India that got maximum benefit from the project.

The parliament was not untouched by the issue of the Gandak Project. Opposition member Shambhu Ram Shrestha tabled a motion before the house that the Gandak agreement be cancelled and new agreement based on equal benefit be made. But the motion was rejected by the house.

Giving answer to the question raised by member Prime Minister B.P. Koirala frankly admitted that Nepal had committed a mistake by promising to give India water in certain quantity. He added "but India would not invest so much money without this guarantee."

Processions, meetings and strikes were organised, black day was observed by political parties and editorials protested the agreement. Interestingly, Tanka Prasad Acharya, who was member of Matrika cabinet that agreed the Koshi Project led the movement against the Gandak Project.

Jaikundi: Where India was Defeated and Nepal had to Pay Fine

Immediately after the signing of agreement on the Gandak, India started construction work at Jaikundi in West the Rapti in Western
Nepal to benefit Bharaich district, India, which would flood agricultural land in Deokhuri, Nepal. But people living in would be affected areas and Nepali press raised their voice strongly against the construction.

The poster with the slogan 'No Jalkundi, Save Deokhuri' was one of the main attraction on the gate built to welcome late King Mahendra who was visiting western Nepal. Processions against the Jalkundi were also organised.

The people's protest was so strong that Prime Minister B.P. Koirala was compelled to promise there would have been no project in Jalkundi if it flooded Deokhuri and was not beneficial to Nepal. Planning Minister Dr. Triveni Prasad Pradhan in a function organised to welcome king Mahendra assured the terrified people of Deokhuri that the government elected by people would not give permission to the project which would hamper the lives of 40 thousand people living in Deokhuri. Later on, Dr. Tulsi Giri, also Minister in Koirala government declared that Jalkundi was not beneficial to Nepal and the government was not in position to give permission to the same.

The issues was raised so strongly because it was confusing and the government as well as the former Prime Ministers were not known to what India was doing and whether permission was given to India or not.

On the issue, Minister for Planning and development Dr. Tulsi Giri said the government under the Prime Ministership of Tanka Prasad Acharya had given India permission verbally to carry out investigation not only on Jalkundi but also on other eight rivers of Nepal. He citing Indian technician informed that the project would be of 200 ft. high and 800 acres of land in Nepal would be flooded. The project would irrigate 0.3 to 0.4 million of acres land mainly in India. He said but the authorised document could not be available.

Prime Minister B.P. Koirala said that the permission for the project had been given by Acharya government. Later on he corrected himself and made it clear that it was the time of king's direct rule when the permission for survey was granted.

But Gunj Man Singh - Chief Advisor of King Mahendra during king's direct rule-refuted the Prime Minister's statement and said that the Indian Ambassador to Nepal happened to ask permission to carry out survey on 54 rivers of Nepal. Nepal had given permission to do so on 6 or 7 but rivers were not identified.

The issue was dealt in such a way that it appeared to work like not the dealings between two governments -- one could ask verbally and there was no need of written permission, too.
Finally, India had to give up the project but India was "hurt" and took revenge.

Nepal thought that it would have been beneficial to Nepal had the project been established at Naumuri instead of Jalkundi which would irrigate Deokhuri and Kapilbastu by giving India little chance of taking benefit of the water resource especially in dry season. With view to tap this opportunity Nepal conceived Sikta Irrigation Project. India took it as a great opportunity which it was waiting for a long time to teach a lesson that Nepal could do nothing if it is against India's interest. It took every step to prevent international agencies from taking part in the project associated with west Rapti. The Sikta Project which was supposed to be funded by World Bank was finally killed.

**Tanakpur Barrage Project**

More recently in early 1992, after eight hours of commotion, the House of Representatives, was finally adjourned. The slogans "You can not sell the country" "Table the agreements for discussion" and "You can not go against the constitution" were chanted by the members of the opposition, for eight hours and Minister of State for Water Resources was prevented from going to rostrum to make statement on the understanding reached between Nepal and India, during the present Prime Minister's New Delhi visit.

The issue that hit the house was the Tanakpur Barrage Project. Members of the opposition parties demanded that the understanding reached with India on Tanakpur Barrage Project be placed before the house and be passed by the houses according to the provision in the Constitution of Nepal. The Constitution requires that treaties reached between Nepal and other countries on—among others--the utilisation of natural resources should be approved by the two third majority of the both houses. While members of ruling Nepali Congress advocated that the understanding reached with other countries should not necessarily be approved by the house, the members of opposition rallied behind their demand on the ground that the understanding is also defined as treaty in treaty act of Nepal. The issues of Tanakpur became as prominent as the issue of the Gandak in 1960.

The Sarda barrage constructed by British India in the Mahakali was to be replaced by a new barrage. So it was necessary for India to have the Tanakpur Project.

With this background, India started Tanakpur Barrage Project in early 1980s'. Under this project India constructed a canal with 1000 cusecs capacity to irrigate land in India and built up a hydro power plant with capacity of 125 Mw.
Under the understanding reached between the two countries, Nepal would make about 2.9 ha. of land available to project for the construction of bond. The project would supply 150 cusecs of water to Nepal. (The Mahakali has a mean annual flow between 1100-1300 cusecs). Nepal would receive 10 MW of energy annually free of cost from India.

The issue eventually ended as becoming the talk of the town for about a month. The opposition in the beginning charged the government of compromising national sovereignty and later on they gave emphasis on the sharing of the benefits from the project.

The government, after long discussions, placed the treaties, decisions reached with India on the Tanakpur Barrage Project before the house. The House of Representative formed a special committee under the chairmanship of Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, to scrutinise and study the treaties, agreement or understanding and other decisions taken during the Prime Minister Koirala’s visit to India and submit a report. The committee is still working on the issues. The report will probably be submitted to the House in forth coming session.

Conclusion

It is widely accepted fact that Nepal has always been cheated and India had taken more benefits from the joint projects, whether it is the Sarada - the project signed by British India and Rana Prime Minister, or the Tanakpur - The project agreed by the democratically elected government of India and Nepal because the projects were funded by India. It is never realised that most of the politicians committed the mistakes. Tanka Prasad Acharya - who was Minister in Matrika government which agreed to carry out the Koshi Project, thought that it would be beneficial to Nepal and India to carry out the Koshi Project but when B.P. government signed the Gandak Project he accused the government of surrendering before "big brother" (India). He never thought that he was also responsible for the Koshi Project which was not in a better position than Gandak for Nepal. On the other hand, the government of Nepali Congress - the party with the opinion that the Koshi Project was not beneficial to Nepal agreed to carry out the Gandak Project which was not in better position than the Koshi.

With the bitter experience Nepal had in past, constitution makers this time, agreed to impose certain restrictions on the government on the issues of utilising natural resources of Nepal in collaboration with a third country. Constitution of Nepal requires that the agreement reached with third country on the utilisation of natural resources, among others, should be approved by two third majority of the joint meeting of both houses.

While Nepali people with newly got sovereignty have set their eyes on a modern Nepal - which some politicians say will be like
Switzerland. The leaders who hold both executive and legislative power, however, frequently quarrelling with each other on the issues of water resources forgetting the fact that water resources is the only resource they have. Also fourth state, divided into two opposite groups has been blindly backing their 'heroes' forgetting their role of informing people in a nutshell. No one seems to be taking water resource development seriously. No one seems bothered to ask the leaders about their rights to negotiate on behalf say the farmer of Hanuman Nagar on the Koshi Banks or those in Chitwan on the banks of the Rapti. Call it "Environmental Journalism" or "Development Journalism" or just "Journalism" these are the issues the journalists need to focus their writings on.