**Beavers build dams**

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**The eagle may soar; beavers build dams (Bill Vaughan)**

For far too long the Pakistan’s planning eagles soared high with ambitious hydroelectric projects but what yielded results finally was a beaver in the form of current Chairman WAPDA, who overcame bureaucratic languor and planning minefields to inaugurate the first large storage dam of the country since 1977. That it took over fifty years for a water scarce country to begin construction of a big dam is a testament to the planning inertia and lack of will of all stakeholders related to the national energy scene. Compared to us China, USA, and India have 23000, 9200, and 4300 large dams. The share of hydroelectric dams in our energy mix being 22.79% calls for some serious introspection when the price of electricity is continually spiking up due to costly thermal power generation.

Mohmand Dam that is a veritable metaphor for our desultory planning was finally brought to fruition due to the concerted efforts of the present Wapda leadership and the government’s special focus on hydropower projects. The previous governments both civil and military had displayed a predilection for headline making projects corresponding to a government’s tenure i.e four to five years. The myopic objectives to curry favour with one’s electorate trumped national interest where long gestation but cheap power generation hydroelectric projects were subjected to procrastinations and rejections. The results are obvious for all of us to see. A country endowed by nature with a 50000 MW potential is beset with water scarcity and energy crisis. Our domestic and commercial power rates have become exorbitantly expensive while high industrial rates have made exportable industrial output most expensive in the region.

Ironically all of the above has been wrought upon ourselves because of our shortsighted and visionless policies. Consider for instance the cost of electricity generation through different sources i.e RLNG Rs 9.64 per unit, furnace oil 11.9, local gas 5.7, coal 7.5, and hydel Rs 2-3 per unit. The egregiously flawed policies of increasing thermal share in total national energy mix resulted in one of the most expensive electricity rates in the region. Besides above the lack of large storage dams has resulted in a profligate waste of precious water resource leading to a water scarcity that threatens our food security like a Malthusian spectre. Mohmand Dam’s inauguration in this bleak scenario has come as a godsend for Pakistanis. With a water storage potential of 1.2 maf and a power generation capacity of 800 mw Mohmand dam promises to irrigate over 160,000 existing and 16700 new acres of arable land.

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The dam that promises to control the devastation of floods in Charsadda, Peshawer and Nowshera besides providing 300 million gallons per day for the Peshawer City shows triumph of hope over adversity. Having being delayed on one pretext or the other since last 50 years, the project kept hanging fire with even the private sector for long seven years which failed to take it off the drawing board. The project was inaugurated finally on 2nd May by Prime Minister in a simple yet impressive ceremony, amidst the turbaned tribesmen from Mohmand, who had provided 818 acres of their land for a pittance compared to other areas where land acquisition becomes the prime hurdle to a project of national importance. The soul stirring keynote address of Chairman WAPDA, followed by PM’s speech were the star attractions of the event.

Chairman WAPDA spoke of the hurdles in the way of the project and made a well-reasoned pitch for a new planning paradigm for hydro projects sans bureaucratic delays. He paid glowing tribute to the blood of martyrs who had consecrated this ground through their sacrifices. The 309.55 billion project was kick started through a timely allocation of Rs 17 billion underscoring the seriousness of the government and WAPDA. Chinese EPC firm China Gezhouba’s representatives were quite gung ho and keen to commence dam construction and were being provided all necessary assistance by Pakistan Army and Wapda. The Prime Minister in his address alluded to the passion of Chairman Wapda as a force multiplier in construction of dams and recommended the same approach for all development efforts.

What are the important takeaways from Mohmand Dam’s example? The most important lesson is the need for a political will and placement of individual’s imbued with a passion for the undertaking. Without government’s active support and the dynamism of the leadership no project can reach fruition. A combination of vision, will, and civil-military cooperation is de rigueur for successful planning and execution of all future development undertakings. The current Wapda team undertaking the project with assiduity and passion needs to be kept with the project for a sufficiently long duration to ensure smooth execution of the project. The cooption of the local population through sharing of benefits with communities surrounding the project site is also an area that needs to be focused in all development planning initiatives. Another institution that needs to be made part of this development matrix is the judiciary.

Since most of the hydel projects contain issues like land acquisition, displacement of population, environmental impact, and contractual complications the possibility of litigation as a derailment tool cannot be ruled out. The example of Kalabagh Dam is a grim reminder of the power of lobbies inimical to Pakistan’s interests. The role of judiciary here assumes top priority. The ownership of mega hydel projects therefore needs to be taken over by judiciary in addition to government, army and the relevant departments. The civil-military cooperation and judicial patronage are the essential elements of a development strategy that should guide our future development efforts. It is the beavers’ slow yet sure industry as opposed to the eagle’s panache that should inform all our future large dam development endeavours.

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