

Peter Svalheim. 2009. *Kraftverket: Odd Hoftun: Portrett av et livsverk*
[The Powerplant: Odd Hoftun, Portrait of a Life Project]. Oslo:
Luther Forlag.

The Powerplant is a biography of the Norwegian missionary and hydro-electric engineer and entrepreneur Odd Hoftun (b. 1927), who spent 50 years developing hydro power in Nepal. The biographer Peter Svalheim gives a thorough account of both Odd Hoftun's and his wife Tullis'

careers, in 400 pages, two appendices and more than 302 detailed endnotes. The biography follows their lives chronologically, from childhood and Odd's studies in Norway, through their remarkable experiences and contributions in several regions of Nepal.

The title *Powerplant* is a doubly apt description, both of the man Odd Hoftun and of the object of the couple's lifetime missionary project. Svalheim tells in detail of how their lives intertwined with the history of hydro power and related competence building and business development in Nepal during 50 years.

Hydro plants now provide more than 90 percent of Nepal's electricity production. Their history goes back to the Pharping Power House built in 1911, but it was only in the 1950s that developments picked up. That decade witnessed several initiatives, ranging from an international agreement between Nepal and India to utilize the Koshi River, to the small first contributions of Odd Hoftun.

The biography portrays a man possessed of an intriguing mix of strong religious faith, entrepreneurial drive, compassion and strategic capacity. The list of projects presented chronologically in the biography is truly impressive both regarding range and sheer number: a hospital in Tansen (1959), Butwal Technical Institute (1963), and hydro plants at Tinau (1964–1979), Andhikhola (1980–1991), Jhimruk (1987–1994), ending with Khimti (1991–2000) concluded after Hoftun retired.

The biographer takes care to show how the results were not only Hoftun's work but also due to his ability to grasp and exploit opportunities and contacts. The achievements were partly due to the trust Nepal's and Norway's authorities gave him, the former perhaps partly further fuelled by the promise that the completed plants would be turned over to the government after 15 years. Other prominent factors were his valuable contacts with the Norwegian Institute of Technology, especially through Dagfinn Lysne and rector Inge Johansen. They contributed competence and competence training, directly to projects and with Kathmandu and Tribhuvan Universities, illustrating the constructive opportunities for global cooperation among academic institutions.

Hoftun was also well connected with the Norwegian hydro electric engineering community at a lucky time. Several Norwegian hydro electric plants were replacing their fully functional first generation generators, and happy to basically donate them, well suited to the silt-filled waters and the competence level of Nepali communities.

Non-Nepali readers will cherish the book's sketch of Nepal's magnificent and complex history, and the challenges wrought by rapid

modernization. The biographer includes political perspectives, such as the political games leading to government demand for energy entrepreneurs, and the tensions that led to the recent civil war. And he adeptly ties these political aspects to the highly personal.

The Hoftun's Christian beliefs motivated their peculiar missionary mandate: to spread the gospel not by traditional attempts to convert individuals, but by promoting industry and economic development. The biographer also tells of the early death of their son Martin. Funds collected in his memory supported the renamed and now renowned Martin Chautari independent think tank, which *inter alia* scrutinizes the ongoing constitution writing process. Thus even the Hoftun's private loss continues to enhance Nepal society and politics.

The biographer warns that he is enthralled with his subject – who is also his closest neighbor. And the financial sponsor of the book – HimalPartner (previously called the Himal-Asian Mission) – is a member of the United Mission to Nepal (UMN), the subject's employer. One might suspect that a biography based on such close personal and institutional ties would be infused with hagiographic adulation. But the book seems balanced and fair. For instance, it offers thorough accounts of several tensions and conflicts surrounding the Hoftuns' efforts. We read about conflicts within and among missionary organizations about their uneasy interaction with governments and market actors. Svalheim lays out UMN's dilemmas, confrontations and negotiations with government corruption and donors. Indeed, the biography makes clear why many questioned both whether the United Mission to Nepal is really *united*, and in what sense it is a *mission*. Svalheim also describes how Hoftun's honorable commitment to seek common ground in multicultural circumstances sometimes gave way – and sometimes *had* to give way – to authoritative and sometimes authoritarian decisions. Nor does he hide the conflicts including strikes wrought by Hoftun's leadership style toward subordinates, colleagues and superiors. Indeed, when challenged to not write so positively about Hoftun, Svalheim counters that “I write about a workaholic who consistently puts his religious mission above everything else, even above his family. Is this really presenting him in a too nice light?” (p. 11).

The book illuminates at least three other important issues that Nepal continues to face today, and which those eager to assist are well advised to heed. Sometimes the reader might wish that endnotes addressing these were included in the main text.

Firstly, with regard to the history of hydro-electricity in Nepal. Valuable historical comparisons are offered in the endnotes; these deserve to be included in the text and expanded. A reader is left to wonder: Who other than Hoftun and UMN were engaged in building Nepal's hydro electric sector from the 1950s onward? What was unique in Hoftun's efforts, and what lessons did others learn, e.g. regarding competence building?

Secondly, many development aid organizations, perhaps especially those with a religious or ideological mandate, face challenging dilemmas and criticism. For instance, how can these organizations interact with governments and businesses while maintaining integrity? Nepal long prohibited their attempts to convert its citizens to the Christian religion. How should missionary organizations operate in countries that prohibit such proselytization? Should they be there at all? The answer surely depends in part on the achievements that specifically Christian development assistance has brought to Nepal. Thus the author mentions UMN's Sigrun Møgedal's role in promoting community health programs, with an unusual concern for the local users' self perceived needs. How unique was this focus, and were her initiatives copied? For instance, did such experiments further the public health measures that seem to have slashed Nepal's rate of maternal deaths by 37 percent since 1990, to the lowest in South Asia as reported in *The Lancet* (8 May 2010, pp. 1609–1623; reference to Nepal on p. 1619)?

Other questions arise concerning the relationship to capital and other market forces. Many religious traditions including Christianity have reflected about such questions. How can they best maintain integrity and effectiveness as investors, or in the marketplace, indeed, as Hoftun desired, as company owners? How advisable is a 'no bribe' policy that threatens to block or prolongs project approval? And should non-governmental organizations enter into shared ownership deals with governments, and if so, with what structure? These issues continue to merit careful reflection, not only for religiously based development efforts. Some especially difficult issues concern the best modes of interaction with purely profit-oriented multinationals. Lessons may be particularly fruitful for the movement recently labeled 'Social Entrepreneurship' which explicitly seeks profit making strategies to promote social objectives such as development, empowerment, human rights or gender equality.

Thirdly, the success story of Hoftun's contributions to build Nepal's hydro-electric sector also prompts urgent questions about development

strategies. Among the thought provoking contributions of the biography is Hoftun's recipe for successful development work: Start small! Projects should explicitly aim at competence building and other empowerment so the population eventually can do what is required with what they have of resources. The best funding situation for a project, says Hoftun, is to be slightly under-funded: rather spark creativity, than to bask in lavish funding requiring massive reporting obligations to international banks. Indeed, both excessive money and experts are dangerous, since they may ruin even the best programs. Among the implications are that a focus on labor-saving devices is often misguided: labor intensive processes may be neither more costly nor effective, if the aim is competence building. These are indeed profound challenges to a global development 'industry' accused of often being ineffective not to say dysfunctional.

While aspects of Hoftun's development strategy are no doubt controversial, his results make a very strong case that at least some of these small scale forms of development cooperation are effective. They require a long time horizon, and include competence building and even development of a market sector, insofar as the aim is to contribute to a self-sustained society. This approach has many similarities to E.F. Schumacher's 'Small is beautiful,' including the use of 'appropriate technologies.'

So which development strategies work best, and by whose standards? The Norwegian Government Aid organization, NORAD, gave the Andhikhola project very high scores on effectiveness, relevance, quality, local influence and impact on the poorest. The biography may also make the reader suspect that donors and host countries systematically underestimate the massive transaction costs of large scale projects.

Funders such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank and global entrepreneurs mainly out to maximize profit, bring benefits but also new challenges. For instance, in Nepal as elsewhere, several hydro-electric projects have pitted local communities, often indigenous peoples, against the electricity needs of the greater society. Nepal's ratification of ILO Convention 169 that seeks to protect indigenous peoples shifts bargaining power to their advantage, but it remains to be seen whether the overall effects are fair – especially in a country like Nepal with very many indigenous groups, and with large untapped potential for hydro-electricity for domestic and international consumption. Under which conditions are smaller or larger plants better?

What do we now know about effective and sustainable development policies? When and where is small not only beautiful but more effective

and sustainable, and when are larger projects indeed more effective, due to economies of scale or permanent scarcity of competence? It is in the nature of a biography that the author need neither pronounce on these grander issues, nor resolve them. But the questions merit sustained attention.

The biography of Odd – and Tullis – Hoftun is well informed and highly informative; a worthy portrait of a powerplant couple whose service to Nepal has generated tremendous power and empowerment. It is heartening to note that an English translation of this Norwegian text has been commissioned and is expected to be published by 2012 in Nepal.

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