

Peter Svalheim. 2015. *Power for Nepal: Odd Hoftun and the History of Hydropower Development*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

Nepal had imagined itself as a ‘hydropower nation’ based on an estimate made in 1966 that the country has a potential of generating 88,000 MW of electricity from its water resources. Even before this exact estimation, politicians and policy makers had betted on hydropower as a potential means to develop the country. It was likened to ‘white gold’ and this image was placed in the mind of every citizen of the country, especially school going children. Government policy since the 1960s emphasized harnessing hydropower potentials for faster socio-economic development including industrialization and poverty reduction (Dixit and Gyawali 2010). But the actual progress is far less than the desired goals in spite of the efforts of the government, international aid agencies and neighboring countries particularly India.

The book *Power for Nepal* discusses the works of Odd Hoftun, a Christian missionary and a familiar name among hydropower professionals in Nepal, who worked to start several small and medium hydropower projects including training of professionals in the initial stages of hydropower development. The book has eleven chapters, the sequence of which broadly follows the development ideas that Odd followed as his work progressed in Nepal. The book starts with Odd’s initial visit to Nepal to construct Tansen Hospital in the late 1950s and then gives account of his affiliations with hydropower and general development until the early 1990s. Each chapter of the book describes Odd’s concept or vision of development, its implementation processes and impacts, and personal and institutional problems encountered in this process. ‘Afterword’ in the book summarizes Odd’s overall learning that hydropower development is all about ‘people’s welfare’ and about developing ‘people’s capacity.’

The book argues how difficult it was to actually materialize hydroelectricity production in the early days of development in Nepal which started in earnest since the mid 1960s. Lack of skilled manpower and institutions to undertake the work, non-existence of training institutes for skill development, and a total absence of infrastructure such as road seemed to preempt progress at the outset. Notwithstanding such challenges, Odd made several efforts on a few of the hydropower-related projects he was affiliated with including Butwal Technical Institute (BTI), Butwal Power Company (BPC) and Andhikhola Hydro and Rural Electrification Project (AHREP). These projects were small and intermediate in scale, and Odd emphasized that social justice went hand in hand with hydropower development in these projects including fair distribution of hydropower benefits, participation of the poor and the marginalized, multiple use of water (i.e., power and irrigation), use of co-operative structures, women's empowerment, and health and sanitation. These ideas remain important as hydropower sector is now fast moving to large-scale projects dominated by multinational companies from the private sector. There is every chance that these ideals will be lost in this new environment dominated by the nexus of technocrats, businesspersons and bureaucracy.

Later in his life, Odd was also associated with larger projects with the involvement of multinational companies, big donors and high-paying consultants. This new development in hydropower sector led to – as revealed in the book in its latter sections – transnational flow of capital, geo-political co-operations and conflicts, and political interference in the projects from Nepal's political elites. As a result, hydropower development came to share the woes of other aid-driven development processes in that it was the state and its paraphernalia including the bureaucrats, development consultants, businesspersons and politicians who benefited from aid in the name of helping the common people. Excerpts contained in the book from Odd's correspondence with his family members and colleagues clearly tell us that he was aware of the problem of aid hijack in Nepal and that he had tried hard to avoid institutional mismanagement of aid.

A spiritual calling seemed to guide Odd's work in Nepal as mentioned in his various correspondences. Odd's family and community life in Norway had emphasized moral education based on Christianity, and he had seen Norway emerge from a relatively poor to a prosperous country within his lifetime. These two aspects of his life might have shaped his outlook and

made him a moralist. Odd lived a simple and purpose-driven life guided by responsible freedom, i.e., a feeling that one's work should define one's life and that an individual should provide genuine service to the greater community. The book refers to Odd's debates with his family and friends on the purpose of life and whether to live a life in Norwegian comfort or to take up challenges abroad. The book seems to suggest that Odd would have got higher academic or other positions in Norway through his own qualifications and social connections had he chosen to remain there. But he chose to come to Nepal and cherished the work he did here, which in turn allowed him to overcome feelings of inferiority for not accomplishing as much professional success as those by his Norwegian friends who stayed behind. The book also portrays Odd as being in an influential position, which helped him to solicit support for his work in Nepal from within Norway and from other organizations. It is certain that not everyone has the same kind of network and influence that Odd had. Yet, his deep commitment seemed to be the primary factor for what he could achieve. The network and influence that Odd had in Norway or in other places would not have been exercised if he had no commitment to hydropower development in Nepal.

This book concisely discusses the critical lessons development practitioners can learn from Odd's experiences. For example, Odd's style of working together rather than working alone, pushing to achieve more with less resources, presenting oneself as a learner with open eyes rather than an expert with ready advice as seems to be the norm currently, using local resources as far as possible, creating local pool of skilled persons with training and mentoring, and emphasis on hard work, frugality and creativity are still relevant for development. Odd preferred to work with limited resources rather than with a flood of money as he felt that the former condition triggered creativity to be frugal and efficient and thus led to local innovations whether in technology or in organizational management. The book discusses at length the creative solutions adopted in Tansen Hospital including water conservation through rainwater collection and multiple uses of water. There are similar such examples from other projects too. Odd believed that too much money may kill an otherwise good project, and it may even spoil real progress and create dependency. Odd wrote in a letter in 1959 "I've become a sworn believer in cow dung, rice straw and earth. It's astonishingly good building material, especially when you take the cost into account" (p. 57).

The book discusses interesting episodes where Odd contradicted with other development experts from abroad. It is often assumed that conflicts occur between Nepalis and foreigners and that ‘foreigners’ constitute a homogenous group with the same ideas and attitude. Odd seemed to side with Nepalis than with foreigners on development matters. He periodically ran into difficulty in dealing with the post-war generation of Europeans who did not recognize the importance of austerity and hard work. At times, development practitioners wanted to bring huge funds to fetch most modern of the technology which assumed that bigger is better. They ran into conflict with Odd who believed that small is beautiful and in local incrementality of technological upgrade or the concept of bootstrapping. This book also shows that Odd was appalled by the exercise of ‘power’ by the foreign development experts exerted through their control of money in having an upper hand in decision-making and thus putting the local staff in subservient positions.

Nepal’s realization that electricity generated from its own sources is important for energy security in the future, and that this security is directly linked to Nepal’s sovereignty in its true sense has been accentuated, especially after India’s border embargo in late 2015. As a result, there is even more interest now to develop hydro-electricity because it is the main source of power in Nepal as it lacks sources of other fuel like gas and petroleum products. Moreover, hydro-electricity being clean energy, it has its own benefits. For example, it is argued now that provision of clean energy in affordable prices is one of the most effective ways of reducing poverty in all its dimensions. It is true that there are debates as to which model might offer an effective strategy: whether to rely on small-scale projects that can be developed and operated locally or to go for big projects, whether to adopt multi-purpose projects that generate electricity as well as supply water for irrigation or to focus on single-purpose projects on electricity, whether to embrace the model adopted in Bhutan which was to give full authority to India for hydropower development while ensuring fair share on revenues generated or to fund within and generate locally-reliant development, whether to first develop in-country human resources for hydro-electricity projects or bring in experts and workers from foreign countries.

This book reflects on Odd’s experimentation and experiences with different models of hydropower development with an aim to draw lessons for the current times. Because of a very high demand of electricity now and the widely dispersed nature of settlements in the rural areas, Nepal perhaps

needs different types of hydro projects. Small and medium scale projects could be developed and managed at the village and regional levels while larger projects may be needed at the national level for supply of electricity to urban areas and industrial sectors. There are lessons in the book that could be useful for different professionals involved in hydropower development of different types especially towards making the country self-reliant in terms of human resources, lower projects costs, local innovations, benefits at the grassroots level, and sustainability of the projects.

This book will be useful for a wider fraternity of professionals involved in a diverse range of development projects. It discusses personal aspects of development such as the satisfaction derived from one's work. The book gives an impression that Odd felt content with his life-long work in Nepal. This satisfaction seemed to have come to him from his self-evaluation of his work in Nepal against the life 'goals' that he himself had set. This satisfaction had come early on in his work in Nepal, which might have encouraged him to stay on and work hard for the benefit of the people of Nepal. The book indeed makes a point to say that Odd considered his early experience in Tansen Hospital as "last and highest level of education" (p. 34).

Reference

Dixit, Ajaya and Dipak Gyawali. 2010. Nepal's Constructive Dialogue on Dams and Development. *Water Alternatives* 3(2): 106–123.

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