

Hydropower Development Prospects in Bangladesh-India-Nepal Region

by Md. Asadullah Khan

IN the just concluded International short course on "Small Hydro Power" at BUET energy experts from home and abroad indicated the bright potential of small regional hydro-electric plants in Bangladesh which can complement the large scale power plants in meeting the country's growing need for electricity. The course was organised jointly by the Centre for Energy Studies, BUET in association with Alternate Hydro Energy Centre, University of Roorkee, India, and sponsored by the US AID, Winrock International, and ICIMD (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development Nepal). Without contradiction the power generation capacity in the country which is woefully inadequate to meet the present demand would have to increase manifold to meet the projected demand in the next few years. Shockingly true, till now only about 15 per cent of the total population has access to electricity.

A colossal investment to the extent of about 20,000 crore taka would be needed in the next seven years to meet the nation's power demand which is estimated at 3100 MW in the year 2000 and 4000 MW in the year 2005. It is knowledgeably learnt that the present capacity of PDB with 52 generation units under 18 power stations is between 2000 and 2100 megawatts, whereas the country's total need is about 2300 megawatts. More ominously, though the demand continues to rise at the rate of 10 per cent every year, PDB cannot ensure

full supply of power it can generate because of the inherent problems like leakages, breakdowns, accidents in the worst out stations built some 37 years ago coupled with the most blatant system loss in the form of theft of electricity that devours about 30-40 per cent of the generated power.

Against the backdrop of such a dismaying situation, any effort to bridge the present demand-supply gap in this vital sector must be welcomed. There comes the need to set up small hydro plants that could come in a long way to solve the power needs of the country at least partially. Experts have pointed out after detailed studies that at least 100 MW can be generated from hill streams in the Sylhet region. Hydropower, as the experts indicated, offers tremendous potentials on many considerations.

The conversion efficiency from natural resource to electricity is 85 to 90 per cent for hydropower compared to 20 to 30 per cent for thermal resources, such as fossil fuels, nuclear and geothermal sources. Harmful environmental impact for hydropower is minimal except for land submergence under reservoirs and this also happens to be negligible in case of mini-hydropower. According to expert opinion, in the realm of electricity unit sizes ranging from 100-1000KW are termed mini and unit sizes ranging from 500-5000KW are referred to as small hydropower.

Mini or small hydropower provides an attractive means for achieving rural electrification, power supply to irrigation and drainage pumps, and cottage industries. It is worth mentioning here that the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal possesses hydropower potential of an unimaginable magnitude. Nepal possesses hydroelectric power potential of about 83GW (1 gigawatt = 1 billion watts) of which only about 50 per cent is considered to be economically feasible for exploitation. As of date the installed capacity is about 319MW. The capacity will be further augmented to about 600MW in about two years as reports from Nepal indicate.

True, Bangladesh is an extremely flat delta area built by the three major rivers, the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna. But in contrast to this huge delta area, the hilly districts of Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachari and Sylhet offer potentials for small hydropower stations to be set up. In the hilly region of southeast, the main rivers, the Karnaphuli, the Matamuhuri, the Sangu and the Bankkhali provide potential for storage that can be used to generate hydropower. The experts have opined that with a discharge of 2710 causes, and a mean head of 138 ft the installed power generation capacity in the Sangu river could be as high as 82MW. The Matamuhuri river is suit-

able for a mini hydropower plant with a mean head of 1 meter as the river has a mean annual discharge of 3200 cusecs.

Studies of the Teesta Barrage project, the biggest gravity irrigation project in the country showed that the project could generate power as high as 125 million kWh. With the construction of a barrage over the river in 1990 and with more than 100 regulating structures over the irrigation canal systems and a head difference of at least 1 ft, at least nineteen potential sites of hydropower generation could be built. Reports suggest that at least for six months in a year around the monsoon, power can be generated in these sites. Moreover, the study conducted by the GOB in 1981 for exploring the possibilities of mini hydropower generation in the hilly streams and rivers with steep slopes identified 12 rivers/charas where projects could be taken up on priority basis. Some of these are Foy's lake at Pahar-tali, Chittagong, Chota Kumira in Sitakund, Hinguli Charas in Mirarsarai, Sealock in Bandarban, Nikhari Chara and Madhab Chara in Baralekha, Moulabazar, Talma in Fanchagar, Punarbhaba in Thakurgaon including Bhugai Kanga and Marisi in Sherpur. Experts indicated that a total

annual generation of 11,56,320 kWh in Chittagong-Bandarban area, 63,06,041 kWh in Sylhet and Moulabazar districts, 8,56,336 kWh in Mymensingh-Sherpur districts and 18,70,752 kWh in the greater Dinajpur-Rangpur area could be generated. Interestingly, the lone hydropower project of the country with installed capacity of 230MW located at Kaptai in the Rangamati district has been working since 1951.

Power availability from the Goral off take: Studies conducted by experts at the proposed Ganges Barrage project at a distance of 60 km from the Harding Bridge point with head works to be constructed at Goral off take about 13 km downstream of the bridge indicates that a hydro-electric potential exists at the head works of the river Goral to be built with the Ganges Barrage Multipurpose Project. Experts have further suggested that 40 MW installation through SHP (small hydropower plant) appears appropriate. Expected annual generation of 266 GWh (Giga watt hour) would be able to fetch sufficient revenue to pay all the money to be invested. On the other hand savings in fuel cost (in alternative gas turbine plant) will more than offset the investment cost.

Mr. Sanjay Sharma, an ex-

pert from Nepal indicated in his paper that theoretical hydropower potential of Nepal's rivers (excluding those rivers that have basin areas less than 300 sq. kms) stands at 83,290 MW out of which 25,000 MW can be techno-economically exploited with an annual energy of 120,000 GWh. Shockingly, despite the fact that there exists such great potential of hydro-electric development in Nepal, hydro-energy presently comprises only 1 per cent of overall energy consumption in Nepal. The extremely slow pace of exploitation of Nepal's hydropower resources can be attributed to limited financial resources other than the fact that Nepal is a land-locked country with irregular topography. The other reason is that people here remain steeped in dire poverty and ignorance with hardly any imaginative vision for the future.

Tracing back the phenomenal progress in the developed world one can immediately see that electricity consumption in those countries accounted for such progress. Developing countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India and some countries of Asia and Africa which accounted for 75 per cent of the world's population consumed about 20 per cent of the world's electric energy generation. On the average each person in the least developed countries consumed about 250

kWh of electric energy per annum, compared with 12,700 kWh consumed by each U.S. citizen. The developing countries of Asia currently experiencing a growth rate of 8.7 per cent will need to increase their capacities five fold in the next two decades. Thailand, for example, will more than triple its 1991 peak demand of 8045 MW to 25,515 MW by year end 2006. The Philippines expects quadrupling its demand of 4,202MW over the same period. In the context of developing hydropower or so to say electrical power in Bangladesh, we have as much concerns as there are opportunities. While there are opportunities for importing electricity into the northern part of Bangladesh from Nepal through India, there are questions of sovereignty, politics and above all long term reliability. If the recent water sharing agreement between India and Bangladesh is any indication, one can be hopeful that similar agreement can be reached in the power sector as well. There could be tripartite agreement involving Bangladesh, India and Nepal.

Nepal which has potentials of building nearly 15,000MW of generation will sell electricity to Bangladesh and India will transfer the power for a fee. If the eastern grid in Bangladesh can be made stronger, it could also be used to transfer power from Nepal to the eastern part of India. A series of interdepen-

dencies can thus be built to reduce the threat of supply interruptions during times of political difficulties in the region. Reports have it that a 500KV transmission line is being built through Malaysia, to link Thailand and Singapore. Thailand buys hydropower from Laos. In Central Asia there are power purchase agreements between Kyrgyzstan, China, India and Pakistan. Kyrgyzstan has been selling hydropower to China.

In 1996, agreements were put in place for power sales to India and Pakistan through China. Interestingly, when some of the historical and political differences and barriers among these countries have come down in this region in favour of economic development, people either in Bangladesh, India or Nepal continue to suffer inexorably for lack of political wisdom and sanity in the political leadership. There have always been excellent ideas on the establishment of regional power transmission network within the SAARC countries. Similar network already exists in Europe where electrical energy is shared by many European countries. This has contributed to European economic development. Without contradiction, harnessing and sharing of electrical energy of the region among each other for the benefit of the huge population of the region would foster economic development as well as strengthen the SAARC spirit of the regional co-operation.

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Representing the Diasporic Self A Photo-Exhibition in America and Afterthoughts

by Adnan Morshed

RECENTLY a photo-exhibition on Bangladesh in an American university by a fellow Bangladeshi student stirred up a controversy among the Bangladeshi community both on campus and in the vicinity. The exhibition "Two Weeks in Bangladesh" visually depicted, in a sort of travelogue mode, the usual scenes from Dhaka: urban urchins, popularly known as the "tokai", roaming the congested streets, familiar traffic jams, fruit vendors at the market corner, the potter with his stacks of "kolshi", a beggar viewed up close, a snake-charmer, the boats at Shadarghat, etc. Two images in the exhibition drew the most attention from the audience. One was the laughing face of a street urchin or tokai, and the other, a snake-charmer in a busy street acrobatically engaging with his serpent. A large international community watched the exhibition, but it was from the Bangladeshi student body that the controversy ensued. The exhibition elicited more or less two main streams of reactions: one group considered that the sense of happiness attached to the everyday street life, typical of Bangladesh, was artistically portrayed in the photographs, while the other group felt that only poverty, despair, angst and hopelessness of the country's future were naively accentuated. The first group seemed to have seen an innocent beauty in the laughing face of a dirt-poor tokai or a colorful vibrancy in the cramped streets of Dhaka. In short, the sentiment of the first group underscored two points: first, contentment, not necessarily be a corollary of mundane fulfillment, and second, if the truth of Bangladesh is poverty then why not show it. The second group, in contrast, took serious offense and demanded justification for showing only what it saw as pervasive negative images of Bangladesh — images that only reinforce the pejorative stereotypical impression of Bangladesh. Calling the photographs "artistically beautiful miseries," one Bangladeshi undergraduate student wryly wrote to the photographer via internet, "..... if you are not diplomatic enough or politically mature enough, or are simply pretending to be naive, let me give you a hint of what happens when a foreigner sees someone displaying their own selected ugliness: they get an excuse to abuse you. You may want to get some cheap popularity out of this exhibition, but your act affects me, and I have no intention of being aggrieved by your lack of judgement." Aggrieved, the latter group suggested instead, as a possible remedy to this problem of representation, that we could perhaps exhibit what the group dubbed as "positive" images with a view to showing our rich cultural and territorial heritage: the picturesque sites, such as Cox's Bazar and Paharpur, or the traditional artifacts like Nokshi Katha, pottery, etc.

The exhibition had a simple agenda: to reach an international community of the university with the hope of offering a few glimpses into Bangladesh. The debate seemed fairly simple as well, as long as we look-

ing at the whole issue in a cursory manner. If we look at it with a bit of seriousness, it actually brings to the fore one of the most poignant questions of the lives of the diasporic people living outside the psychological safety of their homeland: the dilemmas of self-representation as experienced by an ethnic group residing in territories other than its own. How does an expatriate community culturally represent itself in foreign lands? What are the issues with which an ethnic group starts negotiating its cultural identity with other ones? The ensuing debate proved indeed very therapeutic because it allowed us an occasion to reflect on these crucial questions. In this article, I will spell out my thoughts on the problematics of cultural representation that I, as a Bangladeshi, confront while living abroad. But I will articulate my thoughts mainly by showing some essential problems in the two aforementioned streams. Because, in my view, the sentiment of the larger Bangladeshi community, in America with regard to the question of self-representation seems to waver typically between these two positions. My purpose here is not to offer a third alternative but to try to problematize for the readers the safe boundaries of cultural practice that we either too often take for granted or turn a blind eye to. I urge the readers to visualize my thoughts against the backdrop of the predicament of self-representation as experienced in a transnational and transcultural context.

The first group seems to have gratuitously privileged the photographs of the exhibition with a now-much-questioned art-for-art's-sake status, as if the meanings of an image are enclosed only within its small materiality. In other words, the image can have a set of autonomous meanings, untouched by external forces, and the object of the observer is simply to extract those meanings. The group has forgotten that aesthetic beauty is not at all isolated from the larger social and political realms, especially in the hyperbolically media-influenced contemporary society. Any image is bound to be observed within some sort of prior social and political understanding. It would be really naive to think that a tokai photograph would be seen or judged by an international community merely according to aesthetic criteria, no matter how altruistic the photographer's intentions are. This question of interpreting an image becomes even more problematic if it is viewed in the context of the relationship between the East and the West. No matter how adorable or innocent he looks, displaying a tokai as a street icon is essentially problematic, specially since this kind of images of countries like ours are deeply embedded in the Western mind. When a Bangladeshi is indulging in taking such pictures, the problem is mainly twofold: first, these pictures reinforce what the Western mind thought it perceived "correctly" through the media; and second, they tend to become the representation of the total truth of a re-

gion. The snake-charmer at the market corner, oxen or elephants roaming the bustling urban streets, the stray kid in the slum, etc., are among the West's most historically-sedimented stereotypes of the Orient. The Western news media, novels, films and paintings continually perpetuate these images, infusing them with a totalizing veneer of the truth of a region. This is specially true about the Indian subcontinent, which has often been seen as a land of exoticism, strangeness and mystery, thanks to the numerous European novels, travelogues and genre paintings since the British colonial era. Think, for example, of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, portraying colonial India, and as a remote region full of exotic animals or more recently, of the Hollywood blockbuster film, *Indiana Jones*, where the protagonist Harrison Ford comes to an Indian town and very predictably encounters that snake-charmer. 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