A review of Bhim Subba's new book about the Himalayas and the water environment it houses

Himalayan Waters - Promise and Potential, Problems and Prospects, Bhim Subba, Panos South Asia, Kathmandu, 2001, pp. ix + 286, price not stated

By Ramaswamy R Iyer

In some ways this book reminds one of B G Verghese's Waters of Hope. Like that book, this too starts with primordial times - the thrusting up of the Himalayan range, the formation of the rivers, the formation of the water basins, the people who first came there, the peoples who still live there, and their relationship with the environment that surrounds them. Like Verghese, Subba too sees much promise of prosperity for the peoples of the region in the Himalayan waters, and like Waters of Hope this book also makes a strong plea for inter-country cooperation. However, while the former was a massive volume packed with a wealth of information, this book is much more concise and to the point. The value of the book is enhanced by the clear, colourful and attractive maps, diagrams and pictures. It explains hydrological ideas and concepts and the basics relating to hydroelectric power plants lucidly. Even a person very little familiar with these will find it informative and stimulating.

When this reviewer first saw the book, its glossiness and the colourful illustrations misled him into thinking that it was only about the natural environment. However, that was not the case. The book gives the reader a comprehensive view of the Himalayan environment and particularly its water resource. The book helps the reader understand the geophysical environment of the Himalaya and its huge water resource base. It also introduces the politics of water in the region, the heightened sensitivities on this issue, and the resultant water-related disputes and differences among neighbours.

A few minor errors, imprecisions and loose statements may perhaps be pointed out.

1. "Aryans, Muslims and Mughals came in from the west through Punjab and pushed the indigenous Dravidians south" (p.6). The Dravidians are not command universal acceptance, but leaving that aside, did the Muslims and Mughals also push the Dravidians south?

2. "But all is not well" (p.65). That refers to the Ganges Treaty. After a shaky start in 1997, the Treaty has in fact been implemented with relative success. India has been importing water to Bangladesh and Bangladesh has been exporting water to India. The upside of the Treaty has sometimes been exaggerated. After a shaky start, India has taken the Treaty seriously and has continued to implement it. Bangladesh has also continued to implement it. Both sides have agreed to update the Treaty after coming to power, and neither the Government of India nor that of Bangladesh has sought a review of the Treaty, though the Bangladesh government has indicated that it would like to review the Treaty after coming to power.

3. "... In 1987 the technology reached Asia..." (p.158). 1987 is evidently a misprint.

4. "The Supreme Court of Nepal ruled that the government had to.......obtain parliamentary approval for the accord with...or Agreement, but it did not state whether it was of such a nature as to require ratification by a two-thirds majority."

5. "...the ratification of the Treaty... was made conditional..." (pp. 194-5). There cannot be a conditional ratification of a Treaty. Nepal did not agree to the conditions that Bangladesh proposed, and Bangladesh did not agree to the conditions that Nepal proposed. These two resolutions (sankalp prastav) were essentially "strictures" (as is often the case in Nepal), but they do not have the status of a Treaty.

6. "Fears... that Nepal would never be able to obtain a fair price..." (p.195); "India, however, reject the avoided cost compensation principle and hold that the exchange of water is a valuable contribution to the development of the two countries..." (p.195). The idea of avoided cost compensation is based on the principle that the exchange of water is a valuable contribution to the development of the two countries. India has rejected this idea and has proposed instead that Nepal should be paid for the water it exchanges. The idea of avoided cost compensation is based on the principle that the exchange of water is a valuable contribution to the development of the two countries. India has rejected this idea and has proposed instead that Nepal should be paid for the water it exchanges.

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However, we must return from nitpicking to the solid worth of the book. In particular, the Flood chapter is an excellent chapter. It makes the reviewer believe that the title of the book is only partly correct - the book does not deal with the water that runs to the sea. It deals with the water that runs to the sea. The title should have been "Himalayan Waters - Promise and Potential".

The "Can Do" list is an excellent list. The book ends with a plea for action. The need to understand is not enough; the need to act is now. The need to act is urgent. The"Can Do" list is an excellent list. It is a list of what can be done. It is a list of what needs to be done. It is a list of what must be done. The"Can Do" list is an excellent list. It is a list of what can be done. It is a list of what needs to be done. It is a list of what must be done.

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