POWER FOR NEPAL

Odd Hoftun & the History of Hydropower Development

By Peter Svalheim, translated by Katherine M. Parent

Publisher: Martin Chautari, 2015, Price: NRs 700/-, ISBN: 9789937594127, Pages: 289

Reviewed by Bhola Shrestha

The book Power for Nepal describes the pioneering work led by a Norwegian missionary engineer in the creation of hydro power industry in Nepal over a period of five decades, beginning in the 60s. It's an incredible story of a man raised in Christian faith who felt a compelling desire to serve those less fortunate than him in an unknown land by helping them help themselves.

As a young man Odd found it appealing to his understanding of himself with a character in Henrik Ibsen's play who felt he had "God's seal on his forehead". Odd felt that 'some great task lay before him'. This had to with 'practical decision-making', 'diesel on his fingers and the roar of motor in his ears', 'technical challenges', 'days and nights of painstaking work to nurse ideas and visions to life, planning them down to the smallest detail'.

No wonder, Odd Hoftun, aged 31 left his comfortable career as electrical engineer in Norway in 1958 and with his wife Tullis came to Nepal to help build Tansen mission hospital. Odd at the same time fell in love with the country. After the hospital construction was completed in 1963, Odd continued to work in Nepal for another five decades. During the period, Odd established over a dozen institutions and companies which led to the creation of hydropower industry in Nepal; all from scratch and against all odds. Human capacity building was the central goal in his every undertaking of hydropower projects large and small during the decades.

The author argues that the, 'combination of place, culture and time constituted the background for Odd's extraordinary life'. Odd was born to an engineer father in 1927 in between two world wars in a Norwegian rural municipality of Al in Hallingdal where his home was 'literally a hydropower plant'. Odd, a hydropower kid helped his engineer father in the operation of power plant. His father Erik was a manager of local utility supervising operation and maintenance of power plant, transmission line, and distribution network and in expansion of large and small projects, handling retail sales and customer service.

Erik had a strong sense of duty and his home was a center of village progress, and the first place for ideas and plans. For Odd his father was his idol. Odd's mother was kind hearted and she sent Odd out with packages of food for people who were suffering due to deep poverty prevalent in many Norwegian rural mountain community in those days. Odd inherited a strong Christian upbringing through his long family linage which had close links with Christian revival

leader, entrepreneur and author Hans Nielsen Hauge who greatly influenced Norwegian Christian and community life in the early 19th century. Odd grew up at the crossroads of church and industry.

When Odd lost his father when he was only 18, Odd thought to become like his father, a conscientious and skilled man who carried out best his job in hand. Odd went to study electrical engineering at Norwegian University of Science and Technical (NTNU). He was a natural leader, thinker, and intellectually gifted debater and carried his work with great intensity. Even as an engineering student Odd had the desire to serve in Christian mission work overseas. After few years of practical work experience in a power company in Norway, Odd and his wife Tullis, in spite of their having some health issues came to Nepal to serve United Mission to Nepal (UMN) to build Tansen mission hospital. Little did they know then that this would be the land of their lifetime work.

In over four decades to come, Odd conceptualized, founded and developed over a dozen institutions and companies that put Nepal in the world map (among the developing countries) in hydropower industry capability among others. These institutions and companies and projects nurtured Nepali talent and are owned and managed by Nepalese. This means over time Nepal has developed the capability to design and construct hydropower projects and manufacture some of the electro-mechanical and hydro mechanical components to world standard.

The institutions and companies and some of the projects accomplished by these companies run a long list: Butwal Technical Institute (1964), Butwal Engineering Works P. Ltd. (1964), Tinau Hydropower Plant (1966-78), Butwal Power Company Ltd. (1965), Butwal Wood Industries P. Ltd. (1978), Butwal Plywood Factory Pvt. Ltd. (1973), Development and Consulting Services (1972), Gobar Gas Company (1978), Andhikhola Hydropower and Rural Electrification Project (1982-1990), Himal Hydro General Construction Company Pvt. Ltd. (1978), Nepal Hydro and Electric Company Pvt. Ltd. (1985), Jhimruk Hydropower Plant (1992-1995), BPC Hydroconsult (1986), Hydro Lab, Himal Power Limited (1992).

Odd struggled against all odds in the construction of Tansen hospital: lack of skilled workers, lack of construction materials and lack of funding. The later however he felt triggers the imagination which helps to bring local resources and inventiveness. Odd's philosophy was if one could complete a task with a minimum of outside funding using local resources and workers, that would set an example to be followed in a country like Nepal.

While Tansen hospital construction work was underway, Odd and Tullis were making life plans starting with setting up a technical school in Tansen. UMN approved this proposal and sent to ministry of Education for approval. The request was turned down as the government did not want another mission school. When the next proposal to the government went with the objective of establishing Institute of Technology and Industrial Development (ITID), the proposal was approved in March 1963, with a condition that it should be in the plains not in the mountain. Butwal therefore was chosen and ITID became known as Butwal Technical Institute.

The book narrates the phenomenal success of BTI in imparting skills and attitudes to the trainees under master technicians from the west and how BTI gave birth to number of institutions, companies and projects each supporting the business of others. These initiatives helped spin off a number of private workshops owned and operated by BTI graduates.

Everything Odd conceived and realized in founding of these over dozen institutions, companies and projects were a pioneer works in Nepal. As in any pioneering work Odd faces untold obstacles from all corners: colleagues who had different development philosophy, trainees who misunderstood the principles being inculcated and many technical challenges in building first hydropower plant in a tunnel in mountain in Nepal, lack of funds and expertise such as tunneling in Himalayan mountain. Odd and Tullis also had the challenges of raising a family in an unknown land without the comforts so easily accessible in their home country. There were more challenges in the making when their second child born in Tansen who had some birth complication later developed a serious type of disability that required assistance even to turn a page of book and not to mention other daily chores. It is unconceivable for an ordinary mortal how could one continue envisioning, planning, implementation and realizing one pioneering works after another for over four decades against so many odds. It appears that Odd thrived in such challenges possibly with inspiration and guidance he found from his strong Christian faith.

The central motivation for Odd in his life time work in Nepal was a kind of “society construction” to build up proficiencies and attitudes, which led to the creation of a vibrant hydropower industry in Nepal. The book is a wonderful testimony of an extraordinary life of Odd Hoftun, the father of hydropower industry in Nepal.