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When work was begun on Shahtoot dam on Kabul River that would provide drinking water to the burgeoning population of Kabul City, there has been protests from Pakistan that the dam would reduce the water flows into Pakistan. The Dawn in one of the articles has alleged that there could be a drop of 16 to 17 percent of water in the Pakistan side.

Since India has offered assistance in building the dam, as expected the Pakistan media has alleged that a strategic water war is being waged against Pakistan

The 700 Km long Kabul River originates in the Hindukush Mountains, in the Maidan Wardak Province, flows through Kabul, Kandahar and then enters Pakistan north of the Khyber Pass and flows through Peshawar and Nowshera and ultimately joins the Indus at Attock.

The proposed dam is to be built on Maidan River, an upper tributary of Kabul River in the Chahar Asiali district of Kabul Province. The dam will have a storage capacity of 147 million cubic metres and should provide drinking water to roughly two million of the six million people in Kabul alone. It would also irrigate roughly 400 hectares of agricultural land.

The Afghanistan- Pakistan border has a complex maze of rivers and there has been no legal frame work to regulate or share the rivers by both countries. In addition, whatever little the country had by way of water infrastructure have been completely destroyed due to war and even the very institutions that were meant to protect the rivers are no longer in position to take care of the waters.

The result has been that Afghanistan has been mostly dependent on ground water resources for irrigation as it gets very meagre rainfall.

The Kabul River provides livelihood for 7 million Afghans and is an indispensable source for reinvigorating its collapsed economy.

There has been no water treaty between Afghanistan and Pakistan and in the absence of any water regulating infrastructure in Afghanistan, downstream Pakistan has been utilizing all the unused waters that flow from Afghanistan. The Kabul River irrigates 85 percent of land in Charsala, 80 percent in Peshawar and 47.5 percent in Nowshera and is also the source of drinking water for millions of Pakistanis living around the basin.

It was only after President Ghani took over, there is a realization that the immense water potential of Afghanistan should be exploited for the economic welfare of the country. It is said that India has assisted Afghanistan in conducting feasibility studies that would provide 12 smaller dams and generate over 1177 Megawatts of Power. A dam on the Panjshir Canyon alone would be able to store much more water and could generate enormous amount of power for Afghanistan's economy.

It is said that Pakistan which has been freely using disproportionate share of waters coming from Afghanistan is suddenly putting immense pressure on Afghanistan to sign a bilateral treaty now to share the waters. There is international pressure too. Till now Pakistan had no complaints as it could use all the waters coming from Pakistan, but it has realized that it cannot continue when Afghanistan has started using its waters for the development of the country.

Once a treaty is signed, there is no doubt that Pakistan will try to delay as much as possible the new initiatives taken by Ghani Government to make use of its water resources. It is therefore putting immense pressure on Afghanistan to sign a deal on sharing of water resources as it would then have a legal claim to stop or delay various plans Afghanistan has in developing its water resources.

It is therefore of utmost importance that Afghanistan goes ahead with Indian assistance to complete the Shatoot dam that would cost not more than 380 million dollars in time, to relieve the sufferings of the people of Kabul who by one study is said to have more than 60 percent of its water contaminated and unfit for drinking.

Afghanistan should go ahead to use waters that are legitimately theirs.

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