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Water scarcity is a looming problem for Pakistan

“Pakistan can face absolute water scarcity, drought by 2025”. Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources forecasted in 2017 in its annual report. Water is one of the most valuable natural resources available to us. We require water for many of our routine works, from drinking to washing car, in almost everything. In fact, it is impossible to sustain without water and according to scientists, Earth is the only planet in our universe with water. Without water, life cannot exist. But what we are doing with this precious blessing of nature? Depleting it carelessly? What would happen if there would be no fresh water will be left for drinking? Human generation will probably end by that time. Pakistan is among the nations which are facing water scarcity to critical condition. We have a much larger water availability, but political and administrative problems have worsened the condition to such an extent that now the problem has reached an alarming level. Although some people in Pakistan are of the view that the solutions to slow down water scarcity will be much costly for a developing country like Pakistan and focus should be shifted to other problems which are far more concerning and less costly than water scarcity but, we have to build new dams for storing water, reduce water consumption by implementing modern methods to improve water management system and negotiate with India and increase international pressure on it for the practical implementation of Indus Water Treaty otherwise, Pakistan will eventually hit by severe floods and droughts in near future.

The primary problem of water scarcity in Pakistan is the lack of Dams. We have not built any major Dam till independence except Mangala dam and Tarbella dam which were built in 1960s. The major reason is the lack of funds. Although we have not been economically stabilized in the whole of our history, but we are not even building small dams on a continuous basis. The previous government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa built 8 small dams in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in their five years tenure, but they are far less to meet the needs of water reservation of just Khyber Pakhtunkhwa alone (insaf). Historically, this issue has been overlooked due to the destabilized political situation in Pakistan and water politics. Whenever any government tried to build a dam, it had to face opposing pressure mainly from opposition parties or its tenure ends. Even though Tarbella and Mangala dams were completed in the dictatorship era, but Pakistan remained under military control for more than half of the period after its independence which accounts for political instability and hindered the progress of the nation. And in the remaining half, democratic period, delay of government or resistance of opposition parties halted the building of dams in Pakistan. In summers, many areas of upper Indus plain in Punjab face severe floods while areas in lower Indus plain and in desert areas in Sindh, particularly Thar, face severe droughts. What if there would be dams to store the excess water in flood affected areas and an efficient canal system to supply that water to drought suffering areas? The problem of water distribution would be solved then, and everyone would be in relief. Dams will store the excess water, preventing floods and canals will supply that water to the areas facing drought conditions. But lack of funds for building dams and water politics is the main hurdle in this regard. Water problem has now reached to such catastrophic extent that a few months earlier fund-raising movement for Diamar Bhasha dam was started on the emergency basis, by Supreme Court of Pakistan. The construction of Diamar Bhasha dam will cost more than one hundred and fourteen Billion Rupees and out of that amount, just over ten billion has been collected yet in eight months (supremecourt). We have to cover a long way to collect the full amount for Diamar Bhasha dam. Even now, politicians are playing water politics over this issue. If we really want the construction of dams, we should the politicians playing water politics.

The second thing that we can do in slowing down water scarcity in our country is to save water and improve our water management system. Pakistan has an agriculture-based economy dependent on river Indus and its tributaries which feed the whole Indus delta. Crops like sugar cane, rice and cotton are water consuming crops which are grown in large quantities in Pakistan.

Most of the irrigation is done in the upper Punjab region which consumes a lot of fresh groundwater leaving behind less fresh water for lower Punjab, Sindh and some areas of Baluchistan. On average, we produce far less yield per m3 of water as compared to technologically developed countries like America, Israel and some European countries with less fresh water reservoirs available than us. We can use sewage water after full sewage water treatment process and implement those modern agriculture/irrigation methods and techniques to increase the yield of our crops and reduce water consumption in the agriculture field. Moreover, we are facing administrative problems in water management. Some of our big cities like Karachi and Rawalpindi are victims of water mafias and residents have to pay these mafias amount for water. For example, in 2015, thousand above deaths were reported in the month of Ramadan due to heat stroke and thirst (Mansoor Khan). Tanker mafia and mineral water mafia are doing their business by lowering the surface water level. But the tragedy is that government and responsible institutions are not taking proper action against them and they are still making a huge amount of wealth by selling people their own water and creating artificial water shortage. Besides these external problems, pollution is the internal problem of which only public is responsible. We have a lot of water available in our country, but drinkable water is reducing at an increasing rate while contaminated water is increasing at increasing rates. For example, according to the report of World Health Organization in 2017, the water of areas in middle Punjab and lower Sindh is contaminated with dangerous amounts of arsenic, which is like taking slow poison continuously (Matt McGrath). Administrative problems in water management do not require huge investment and funds, these problems can be solved by spreading awareness among the public to raise voice against water mafias, reducing pollution by starting pollution cleaning drives and by selecting city administration and water administration department’s members on merit.

The third thing that we can do in fighting water scarcity is negotiating with India to make them abide by the Indus Water Treaty, 1960. After the capturing of Kashmir in 1948, headworks of some major rivers flowing through Pakistan went into Indian hands. India started taking the advantage of that strategic position over waters. The situation became much worse that in 1960, both countries went to World Bank for the solution of water problem. Controls of Indus, Jhelum and Chenab were given to Pakistan, while of Beas, Sutlej and Ravi were given to India. But India is still violating Indus Water Treaty since its inception, building dams on the Pakistani rivers, causing unwanted water shortages by stopping water and causing unwanted floods by releasing water in the rivers flowing the other side of the borderline. Whenever the tensions start rising between two nations, India stops the water of Pakistan causing water shortage in Pakistan. Most of the plains in Pakistan and India suffer from heavy floods in summers when there is an excess of water flow in rivers due to the melting of glaciers in Kashmir. Almost every time India misuses its control over the river heads flowing through Pakistan and violates the 1960 treaty, releasing water in Pakistani rivers in monsoon makes the floods even more severe. The first thing that we should do in this regard is to negotiate with India over its violations of the Indus Water Treaty. It will help to decrease the current tensions between the two nations. But if negotiations will fail, then Pakistan should try to increase foreign pressure on India, because it is against international laws to stop water supply of the civilians living in the other country during political or military tensions. If Pakistan would be able to solve its problems with India and convince India to practical implementation of Indus water treaty, then at least Pakistan would get rid of the external problems.

Although there are many people in Pakistan who oppose the creation of dams. For example, Kalabagh dam, Diamer Bhasha dam and Mohmand dam have not been completed since many years and because of a very long delay, these projects now cost much more than if they were completed 30 to 40 years before. Most people who oppose the construction of these dams are from Sindh or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region. Their prime concern is regarding the construction site of dams. They used to win public sympathy by making an appeal to their fear of losing their homes because of the construction of dams. But, politicians just use these tactics for themselves to win seats. Currently, the most affected provinces due to water scarcity are Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and in future these provinces will suffer extreme drought conditions earlier than Punjab or Baluchistan. The construction of these dams will give a return to people in the long run for a cost of shifting their homes now. But if people will continue to oppose the construction of the dams, then time is near when they would have to suffer extreme drought conditions. The second reason for the opposition to the construction of dams is the cost of these projects, which will be impossible to collect for a crippling economy like Pakistan. These projects are currently projected to cost hundreds of billion Rupees for completion and might cost much higher at the time of construction. Although it will be impossible to finance the construction of dams for Pakistanis, as it is obvious from the current collected amount for the Diamer Bhasha and Mohmand dam fund, however, we can start making large number of small and medium dams, dispersed throughout Pakistan. By doing so, a large number of people from the same area will not have to leave their homes and it will be far less risky to build small dams according to our budget rather building a much expensive and larger single dam. So, if we want a future survival for ourselves and our children in Pakistan, we must build new dams as quickly as possible with available funds, surpassing the opposition to dams which is merely for the sake of gaining political power. Moreover, there are many people who oppose the construction of dam projects due to their huge construction costs. They usually argue that other problems of our country can be solved with comparatively much lower cost and higher benefits like illiteracy or underdeveloped industrial sector. However, while presenting these alternatives, they forget that without water, we can not survive and if we will die, we can not solve the rest of the problems. Additionally, the opposition has many concerns on the collection of funds by any government institute or organization because of the incompetence and corruption in the government sector. But still, we have to somehow collect funds and raise our treasury for the construction of dams and there is no other more trustable option available than the government. Otherwise, if we will continue to delay dam projects, we will face extreme drought and famine conditions.

In conclusion, if necessary steps will not be taken to slow down looming water scarcity in Pakistan on a prior basis, time is not far when most of the areas of our country will turn into desert. We are blessed with a much greater number of water resources than many other countries of the world, but we have far less dams than those countries. We are not utilizing our water potential instead, we suffered from floods in every summer and bear more cost for the reconstruction of land infrastructure than investing one time in the construction of dams. We have the largest system of irrigation in the world, but it is not properly managed. To reduce water scarcity in Pakistan, it is the time that everyone needs to realize the threat of upcoming droughts due to water shortage and has to play his or her role in slowing the problem down. Else, in a few years, we would be fighting on water and may be almost no water will be left for our future generations.

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