



Beyond Kalabagh dam

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IT is a new era but our concepts are old. At its core, the problem is how Pakistan's policy elite is responding to the challenges thrown up by the severe water shortage afflicting the country this year. Water flows in the major rivers have nearly dried up, with the two major dams seeing negligible inflows during the crucial month of May and early June, when the sowing of the kharif crop gets under way. From across the country, especially Sindh, reports have poured in of water shortages so severe that they have ruined standing crops of sugar cane and vegetables, as well as severely disrupted cotton planting. Tussles over drinking water have been reported in various cities, and long lines of tankers at the hydrants can be seen in Karachi. Yet the only response from the policymakers is 'Kalabagh dam'. It seems our water bureaucracy is incapable of emerging from the early years of the implementation of the Indus Waters Treaty, from the 1960s till the 1970s. The only response they come up with to the changing climatic phenomena — from floods to drought-like conditions — to have hit Pakistan in recent years is more hydrological infrastructure.

Far more than the climate challenges themselves, it is this lack of imagination and openness to solutions beyond brick-and-mortar infrastructure that will do the most damage to the country's ability to adapt to a changing world. We desperately need to go beyond the debate on the Kalabagh dam, and shift the focus, with some urgency, to the software of water management. Reform of the water-pricing regime is critical, and no amount of additional water storage will help until this is undertaken. Conservation and the judicious use of water for farming are also important. Phasing out antiquated irrigation techniques in favour of newer, more efficient drip irrigation methods is crucial. So are reforms that encourage the use of solar tube wells. Beyond this lies a new world of technologies, such as using depleted water aquifers for storage instead of building more dams. With judicious utilisation and reformed pricing, accurate measurement of stream flows through telemetry, and a policy universe encouraging the adoption of efficient irrigation technologies, there is no reason why our debate should remain mired in the Kalabagh stalemate. It is time to move on from the early boom years of water infrastructure development.

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