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Asian Values in Journalism: In There Such A Thing?

By

P Kharel
Asian Values in Journalism

Is There Such a Thing?

By P. Kharel/NEPAL

Asia, home to three other civilisations, need not necessarily have values as common as that in Europe, Australia and the Americas. Europe, for one, shares a Greco-Roman history and the roots of religion imbibed in the Holy Roman Empire and Church. An East-West divide in Europe may be traced to Eastern and Western Catholicism, the former reverting to Grecian identity and thus influencing orthodoxy in the eyes of the West while the West could go on to reduce the role of a centralised Church in the various manifestations of reforms.

A “north” and “south” divide in values in Europe may also be traced to Moslem incursions precipitating terms such as a “Latin” identity while the Balkan crossroads may have yet to harbour any distinct value of sorts, given its continuing history of interaction between Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam. In terms of values, Turkey hardly shares the European mainstream which is common from the Adriatic to the North Sea. Whatever, a distinct European value system is identifiable. It is this system that prevails in the Americas, Australia and Europe, given shared roots propelled by colonialism.

Although Asia gave birth to Christianity as well as all other predominant religions of the world today from which a value source may be identified, Christian values, as that identified by the West, may hardly be considered part of a uniquely Asian value system despite the inroads it continues to make within the Asian land-mass both through calculated and concerted missionary activities as well as by examples set formerly as colonial masters and currently as the repository of what may be cumulatively termed as “modernism”.

In a manner then, it may not be possible to delink European values as non-Asian since many countries over the years have tended to see examples set by the West as targets of development. Take, for example, values regarding democracy, democratic government, legal codes, equality of sex, dressing habits—a whole gamut of everyday things from speech to the manner of worship and behaviour have in Asia been influenced for centuries by the West making these values as universal in Asia as elsewhere, although the degree to which they have been adapted in the Asian context and the manner may differ from place to place.
On the other hand, the concerted drive of young Islam, given its codes in the Quran and its origins in Arabia, may have spread its wings to the Mediterranean but it was in the East, across Central and West Asia to India and along the East Asian coast down to the "spice islands" of Indonesia that Mohammed's message and the precepts he spelled for humankind found audience. Obviously, Moslem values no longer remain "Arabian" but have adapted to local conditions. The religion as that practised in Indonesia may differ from that in Iran.

However, the fact that Islamic values are common to all Islamic countries and had the power of absorbing even such conquering hordes as the north Asian Mongols speaks much of a Moslem identity in Asia that is Asian. Islam was conceived in Asia and has disseminated a whole set of values throughout Asia.

Of course, one cannot leave out Hindu and, or as distinct and yet as part of the same, Buddhist value systems. Conceived of as a reaction to orthodox Brahmin interpretations of a set of beliefs accumulated over the migratory years from Central Asia to the Indo-Gangetic plains, Buddhism has left its stamp across the East and North Asia population. If South Asia retains much of the original Hindu sets of values, the Buddhist reaction has influenced Chinese Confucianism and Japanese Shintoism.

If religion is one primary source of human values, Asian diversity demands that search for a distinct Asian value system be approached with the realisation that, in Asia, separate value systems function at the same time and may even interact within the individual differently, conditioned by such real factors as geography, history, culture and by exposure to things modern.

Of course, as must be stressed repeatedly here, religion alone is hardly the only source of values. The harsh desert climate common to most West Asian countries and common rule at one time or other under the Turks and Arabs could have spawned a separate set of values, now identified with things Moslem. Buddhism became one thing in China's Tibet while another in Confucian China and yet another in Shinto Japan, indeed, must of the Steppes must have so many cross-currents under a series of conquests that value systems might well be difficult to identify to the roots. And, despite religious variety, commonalities allow a "subcontinental" values system to be identified in South Asia, something generally summed up as cultural.
Again, the arrival of the West in Asia is another source of value inception. Lebanon, because of the French perhaps, until reaction to Israel politicised religion anew, was known for its permissive practice of values.

Egypt, after the arrival of the British, has hardly remained a bastion of orthodoxy. India, the jewel of the British Empire, remains an advocate of secularism in affairs of state. The new democracies of Central Asia have re-discovered Islam but may yet retain many a value dictated by its recent Soviet history. Even China remains communist despite its junking much of its Marxist ideology in practice. Japan, which reacted to American gun-boat diplomacy with a state policy that emulated the West, is very much at the forefront of receptivity to things Western and the new Asian tigers and emerging ones may take lessons from that foremost of Asian tigers to remove hindrances in value systems that may obstruct emulation.

Consider that journalism developed after Europe delinked the state from religion and insisted upon the separation of the powers of state. "The Fourth Estate" emerged originally from the pens of select members of the intelligentsia thinking out loud on matters of the state as private citizens previous to which matters of state for discussion were the preserve of the state. An increasingly assertive economic class, fuelled by colonial expansion and the industrial revolution, could help support such opinions separate from the state and thus was born modern journalism. The penny press brought journalism to the masses.

The concept of journalism as a modern enterprise, economically viable because of its success in accumulating public patronage through the practice of the profession, is relatively new to many developing countries. But the fact remains that the concept baked the media industry and could well have contributed much to the communication revolution the world witnesses today. Journalism has emerged from print to the radio and, then, television and now has gone cable and satellite with such new innovations as computer networks at home opening vast possibilities. These are largely Western innovations whose degree and manner of adaptation in Asia may as well also be influenced by prevalent value systems.

Regardless of the technology adopted, search for an Asian value system in journalism must delve into the contents of journalism rather than the form. Obviously, for reasons of effect and competition, transfer of technology in journalism would be conditioned by the economy rather than values. It is what goes in as contents that would reflect the values more than the technology adopted.
Take, for example, the fact that West Asian sentiments regarding sex and nudity become a matter of concern to satellite networks and you see value systems affecting content. If this is the case for television that propels a search for separate Arab investments in satellite programmes, the effects of such sentiments on Arab newspapers, among other things, regarding coverage of issues pertaining to sex would surely have been conditioned by pertaining value systems there. In contrast, networks beaming to East and South Asia do not appear to have much problem.

On the other hand, countries like China and Singapore have repeatedly objected to the manner of political coverage in their countries by Western journalism. In other words, they are asserting their values in interpretation of events. Sensitivity to political coverage practised by the West regarding pro-Western states practising orthodox Islam also provide clues that, if there is an Asian value in journalism regarding politics, it is in the fact that journalism is as yet not totally delineated from the state.

Indeed, even widely acclaimed inheritors of British journalism such as that in India appear to have remarkable uniformity of opinion on foreign policy and strategic questions despite the variety of organised political opinion on matters of even the mundane in public.

Is it, then, possible to speculate that there is a relationship between Asian values and the linkage between state and journalism? Is it the current economic status of Asians or is it merely persistence of values that prevent the disintegration of the paternalist family systems into nuclear ones and is it this value system which resists the separation of powers effectively within the state as a result of which journalism persists in identifying with the state at state cognizance? Is there, in this, the continuance of a traditional approach to authority, paternal or state?

Equally worth the exercise would be a probe into the economic viability of journalistic independence as practised by the West when it comes to Asia. Given the nexus propelled by our patronage system of values linking business with politics, is it possible for the business of journalism to allow the adoption of Western values of independence in journalism in the absence of a nod from the state? Could we then state that an Asian value in journalism could be traced to the commonality of journalism being proximous to the state?
Invariably, such an argument must delve into the plethora of political opinions in Asian journalism that run counter to that set by the state. If proximity to the state may seem one trend in Asian journalism, the other would perhaps be in the fact that journalism is in proximity to politics in general, be it of the state or without. Objections might well be raised here: Too sweeping a generalisation on the diversity of values that effect journalism, one might argue, for Asia.

Even the linkage between business and journalism may be swept aside as a generalisation here. The fact is that many Asian mediapersons are professionally employed by individually owned enterprises. If the link between big business and big journalism is so obvious, what makes the West an exception? one might argue.

The state, politics and ownership are determinants to the manner of practising journalism, irrespective of societies, no doubt. They are equal conditioners and reflectors of value systems as well. Take the economics in the fact that, where literacy is low and largely still the preserve of the traditional elite and a few newly economically mobile, a profession of the literate catering to the literate must, to quite some extent, remain as yet the preserve of the traditional elite.

Transcribed in values in systems of cast such as ours, journalism would remain as yet the preserve, by and large, of the traditionally literate class. How this would have effected the practice of journalism in Nepal, for example, in terms of values is more a subject for research than a topic to be concluded upon arbitrarily in this paper.

Nevertheless, considering that the West has had a longer history of upward and lateral social mobility than developing Asian countries, one may not be too far from the truth if a generalisation has to be made that journalism remains in many Asian countries the preserve of the educationally advantaged traditional elites. On the other hand, considering that journalism is a relatively new profession in many countries, the effects of it being dominated by the traditional elites may well be countered by the fact that the profession could quite possibly be staffed by modernists, given the choices in other traditionally advantaged positions that this class would have within reach. The latter would help float the argument that, quite possibly, journalism values in Asia could be more attune to modernism than most other professions, although how they would compare to that in the West must remain, again, a matter of in-depth study not to be easily dismissed in generalisation.
There is no doubt that growing industrialisation and the awareness of the media as an industry—how powerful or soft is another matter—must have left their universal values on Asian journalism as well. We have, however, examples of South East Asia where press freedom vis-a-vis the West is under public debate, of China where it is yet to be of domestic debate, of South Asia where it is understood but suspect in certain sensitive areas of state, of West Asia where terrorism has also proved adequate deterrent to press freedoms on the grounds of traditional values.

We must conclude that if the topic of values and journalism in Asia should be broached, it would be more fruitful to broach it with the question how much modern journalistic values are practised in Asia rather than whether there is an Asian value in journalism. Whether there is a value system unique to Asia is itself to be a vast area of study. How such a value system reflects itself in journalism remains in the realms of the vague.

A safe assumption to be stated here would be that, rather than a single value system, Asia has several sets of value systems. Yes, journalism in Asia has values no doubt but these values need not necessarily be uniform to all Asian countries nor need their effects on journalism be standard to all of Asia. After all, it is people that provide the contents in journalism. That the values they possess should reflect in their profession would be natural. But whether these values can be so easily identified and defined as Asian values becomes suspect in the absence of any authentic academic exercise at identification and definition.

All things said, however, much of the complaint regarding journalism in developing countries vis-a-vis the “West” is the continuing predominance of the Western media in these countries. The fact that “Asian” journalism is still largely dependent on Western news sources makes it hardly a reflection of Asian values. In so many ways, therefore, Asian journalism is playing grounds for Western journalism.

Western professionalism, its objectivity and its ability financially and manpower-wise to be in proximity with news sources continue to reflect in Asian journalism even directly. Couple this with the fact that Asian values in politics and Western media reach may facilitate larger coverage of the West in comparison to coverage of their own countries and the possibility of Western values being promoted by Asian values in the Asian media becomes higher.
Even in the context of the economic ability to sustain independent sources for Asian enterprises in the media reflecting Asian values, restraint in investments may, as in the case of satellite and cable television, already be allowing the West considerable advantage. At least when it comes to reporting on Asia, the West may claim grounds for more objectivity than Asians. There is no denying that Asian journalism has recognised these Western advantages in journalism. There have been attempts such as in the non-aligned newspool bid to overcome such handicaps, widen reach and strengthen professionalism. If an Asian value in journalism is emerging, it is in the recognition that there is need for credible attempts in this direction. In this sense, again, it is hardly an Asian value and more a global journalistic ideal to be persevered for.