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Media Coverage Of Environmental Issues In Nepal And Forestry Master Plan

By

Ananda Ram Acharya
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Environmental Issues in Nepal

And

Forestry Master Plan

By: Ananda Ram Acharya
Background:

Journalism in Nepal does not have a long history. Despite the fact that it saw its landmark in the year 1901 A.D. during the Rana regime, it began only after the dawn of democracy in 1950. But unfortunately, it could not sustain its existence. It had to face a difficult situation following the murder of democracy with the inception of the Panchayati system in 1960.

During the 30 years of Panchayati system, there was considerably quantitative rather than qualitative growth in journalism. In a way, journalism was used as an instrument for fulfilling the vested interests of self-seekers against the spirit of staunch supporters of democracy. In a real sense, those who directed efforts towards working for healthy growth of journalism, were suppressed badly.

Papers, press and pressmen opposed to suppressive policies and practices of the existing system suffered dismissal of registration of papers and sudden arrests. Following the gloomy situation created against the healthy growth of journalism as a profession, investment in press industry was discouraged as a result of which advanced technology was never introduced in the press world.

Despite great hardships and hostile policies of the government a handful of enthusiasts committed to restoration of democracy in the country continued to be associated with journalism. But Nepalese journalism could not thrive
following the stagnation of information dissemination system, lack of trained manpower, financial resources and advanced press technology.

Over and above, the number of paper readers could not increase following ineffective distribution system which is attributed, among other things, to low literacy rate and the lack of transport facilities. Only 35 percent of the total population of Nepal are literate and the country has about 7 thousand kilometers of roads. Nepalese journalism which is centred round the capital and a very few big cities, focuses merely on political events and activities.

Inspite of all these, Nepalese journalism had played a vital role during the historic people's movement two years ago. Nepalese journalism has been enthused to make its headway following the incorporation of positive aspects in the Constitution framed after the restoration of democracy. The provision made in the constitution restores people's rights to be informed and prohibits any illegal dismissal of registration of paper. Now there has been a considerable increase in investment made in press industry and most of the well-known papers published from the capital are printed at offset printing presses. But the number of readers had not increased to a desired extent following the fact that the distribution system has not improved yet.

In recent years, Nepalese journalism has undergone very
many changes. Notwithstanding, a total of some 500 papers have been registered in the kingdom of Nepal, all of them are not published regularly, and some of them come out regularly only for formality's sake. Most of the papers which are regularly published and have access to the public at large give prominence only to political news. Despite many problems, lack of trained manpower is not considered to be a crucial problem in the recent years.

Though Tribhuvan University has been offering journalism as course for the last ten years, efforts towards creating skilled manpower were made only after the inception of Nepal Press Institute at the private sector in 1985. With efforts directed towards creating necessary manpower through periodical training exposure, some 25 journalists are produced every year. But in the absence of institutional development, Nepalese journalism has not yet been able to grow and develop as a profession.

Environmental Problems:

Though Nepal keeps itself apart from problems inherent in other countries, it faces typically serious problems. On the one hand, major environmental problems are caused by mass poverty of the people, rapid modernisation, unplanned urbanisation and industrialisation, and on the other hand, attribute to other environmental problems. The problem of ever-increasing transport traffic,
problems of drinking water and sewerage, setting up of industries in residential areas have all polluted environment. In a word, deforestation should be held as a root cause off all environmental problems.

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world. With 18.6 million population, the per capita income of an average Nepali is U.S. $ 160.00. Ninety percent of the total population depend upon agriculture as a profession. Besides agriculture, cattlefarming also is one of the sources of earning livelihood. Seventyfive percent of the population are dependent upon forest for meeting their domestic fuel requirements. As such, Nepal's green forests which were once considered to be the country's rich resources, are now on the brink of destruction.

Out of its land territory of 147,181 sq. k.m., thirty-seven percent of its territory is occupied by forest and about 5 percent by thickets. Sometimes in the past 64 percent of the land were covered with forest. Deforestation in Nepal began only after nationalisation of forest in 1956. Later, forest began to be used as an effective instrument for solving political problems. Landslide and soil erosion are held responsible for deforestation in hilly region. Besides, rehabilitation programmes carried out for flood striken people were also responsible for deforestation in the Terai areas.

For example, every general election held during the
Panchayati system, the referendum of 1980, the people's movement launched two years ago and the general election held thereafter, were all responsible for the destruction of forest in the country. As shown by statistics, the forest in Nepal is being destroyed at the rate of 0.4 percent every year.

Even during the Panchayati system afforestation and forest conservation programmes were launched. Despite the fact that plantation programmes were launched in some ten thousand hectares of land every year and a considerable number of forest conservation programmes such as seminars and workshops were conducted periodically, such activities were limited to paper work only.

Later, in consideration of the fact that success of the overall forest development programmes greatly depends upon people's participation, forests were later classified into private, community and Panchayati forests so as to make the whole afforestation programme a great success. But in the absence of clear-cut policies and rules and regulations concerning the use of protected forests, policies, however fine they were, could not be properly implemented.

Thus in the absence of other employment opportunities, alternative source of energy and other income sources required to meet the growing needs of the rapidly increasing population, deforestation is taking place at a much faster rate.
The quality of life and the standard of living of the Nepalese people is deteriorating day by day due to serious problems posed by soil erosion and land slide, decline in agricultural production which are all alleged as the main cause of deforestation. Besides, deforestation has resulted in the creation of environmental problems such as land getting drained of water source, drought, unpredictable change in weather conditions and sudden increase in temperature.

Effect of Environmental Problems on Mass Communications.

As mentioned earlier, press in Nepal has not been able to play an effective role following its inassessibility to the readers' community. But it does not necessarily mean that press in Nepal has not played any important role to influence the general public. In fact, Press should be given its due credit for generating environmental awareness among the public at large, policy-makers, planners and politicians. In the very recent years, matters relating to environmental issues have been sharply focussed by almost all the available communication media.

With the inception of Journalists in 1986, there has been a growing tendency of considering the matter with greater concern. So far the Community has imparted skill-oriented training to about 200 journalists on the related areas: collection of information and publication of matters related to environment. Besides, the has been carrying
out research-oriented studies on environment and instituted awards for honouring papers that have contributed to generate awareness among the common people. Moreover, the Institution has been organising a series of seminars and other programmes exclusively designed for the journalists interested in this area. Such activities besides highlighting the important role played by environment in Nepalese journalism, have also contributed to enhance the quality of their roles.

The Institution had also conducted a survey on the prominence given to environment in Nepalese journalism from 1986 to 1990. As revealed by the survey report, a total of 297 pieces of information including news, articles, editorials, etc. were put in different papers and journals published in the year 1986. The pieces of such information were as many as 1463 in the year 1990 with considerable increase in the number of journalists and papers.

Similarly, the country's only Radio Station as the most effective communication media had conducted considerably greater number of environment-related programmes. Such environment-related programmes conducted by Radio Nepal in the year 1990 had outnumbered those conducted 1986. Despite the fact Radio Nepal has an access to the people throughout the country, it has not yet been able to conduct programmes in a professional and practical way because of its authoritarian bureaucracy. Of the various environment-related programmes, the Weekly Programme entitled...
'ENVIRONMENT' has proved very much effective.

Nepal Television, the most effective audio-visual communication media has an access to a limited size of population. There has been considerable increase in its environment related programmes: news and news reviews.

The Community has also been conducting various programmes designed for generating environment awareness among policymakers, politicians and the public at large. As part of such programmes, the Community has conducted special programmes including seminars and discussions focusing attention of policymakers on environmental problems. Various programmes exclusively designed for politicians and others were conducted in the four districts last year. Twelve similar programmes are scheduled to be conducted this year. Besides, the Community had held consultation with members of the Constitution Draft Committee for incorporating clauses concerning conservation of environment in the Constitution. Besides, prior to the last general election, discussions were held with representatives of various political parties in order to ensure their commitment to conservation of environment in their election manifestos. In addition to all these, the Community has been organising various programmes in order to generate environment awareness among the people. Moreover, of the various publications brought out so far, a Wall Calendar, 'ENVIRONMENT' has proved very useful and effective in generating environment awareness among the rural
population. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the
stands as the most effective among some
80 non-governmental institutions set up for awakening
the public to conservation of environment.

Hence the issue of environment has been given prominence
in almost all the media of communication. This has helped
policy-makers and planners to give a deep thought to
environmental issues before carrying on any development
programmes and establishing any industry.

As bound to work in resource constraints, Nepalese
journalism has not been able to achieve its goals to a
desired extent.

Lack of communication skills, language barriers,
non-availability of information disseminating system,
want of professional expertise and advanced technology
and lack of opportunities for the journalists to
participate in international conferences, have all hindered
Nepalese journalism from contribution to regional and
global environmental issues. Apart from this, environmental
problems which are reflected by Nepalese journalists merely
focuses on problems revolving round the capital city.
Among the national level problems, the problem of
deforestation becomes prominent. It is quite natural
to focus on issues of deforestation since it is the root
cause of all sorts of environmental problems.
Nepal with 64 percent of its land covered with forest in the past, has now hardly 37 percent of forest area. That the country's forest resources are inadequate for meeting people's fuel and other needs had been a matter of great concern for people of all sectors.

Donor agencies and nations that have been contributing to Nepal's development projects have taken keen interest in the matter in consideration of the fact that deforestation in Nepal can have an adverse effect both on Nepal's rural as well as international environment. Besides, the country's development goals intended to be achieved through conservation of environment could not be consolidated unless it is able to raise the standard of living of the people by maintaining a balance in its development programmes. The 20-year Forest Development Master Plan is an outcome of the interest and concern of the donor agencies in Nepal's Forest Development Programmes.

Under the 20-year Master Plan designed under the cooperation of the finish International Development Agency and the Asian Development Bank, His Majesty's Government is to spend an amount to the tune of U.S. $ 174,200,000 at the existing exchange rate of 1988. About 34 percent of the total amount is to be borne by the Nepalese government and the remaining 35.4 percent and 30.20 percent by the private
sectors and external agencies respectively. The master plan designed in three years' time commenced implementation in 1989. To be implemented in different phases, it is expected to be complete in 2010 A.D. But implementation of the plan has not yet been sufficiently publicized.

This plan designed to meet Nepalese people's requirements of forest products, and contribute to the country's agricultural and other development programmes, is divided into two phase: short-term and long-term.

This plan is expected to achieve the following short-term objectives:

- To encourage people participation in the conservation, development and management of forest resources;
- To make legal arrangements necessary for seeking and ensuring necessary cooperation of individuals, communities and institutions for conservation, development and management of forest resources, and
- To set up and strengthen institutions necessary for forest development

**Long-term objectives:**

- To carry out forest development programmes in order to meet people's requirements of forest products such as fire wood, food, grass for cattle, and contribute to agricultural development through an integrated approach towards forest and agricultural development.
The master plan is also expected to make considerable increase in the country's forest products by achieving the following objectives:

- To increase fuel production of 73 lacs metric tons of 1985-86 to 1 crore 8 lacs metric tons in 2000-01, and 1 crore and 63 lacs metric tons in 2010-11 respectively.

- To increase wood production of 8 lacs and 80 thousand cubic metres of 1985-86 to 16 lacs and 40 thousand cubic metre in 2000-01 and 34 lacs and 80 thousand cubic metres in 2010-11 respectively.

It is also expected to create fulltime jobs for a total of 25 lacs of people in 2010-11 as against for 17 lacs of people at present.

- With the availability of firewood and wood for construction of houses in an easy way, the quality of living specially that of the lower class people is expected to be improved. With the tremendous increase in the supply of grass, for cattle, there will be considerable improvement in cattle farming which will contribute to increase the supply of milk and meat with subsequent increase in the supply of compost manure necessary for agricultural production. Increase in the supply of wood will facilitate housing programmes. Likewise, conservation of forests will contribute to prevent landslide and soil erosion.
and siltation which will protect people against natural calamities and increase food production by contributing to fertility of soil.

Conclusion:

It is indispensable for a land-locked country like Nepal to conserve and properly utilise its natural resources.

In view of the fact that the problems that we are confronting now due to misuse of our rich water and forest resources are no less serious, it could be ascertained that in the near future we will have to face much more serious and insoluble problems if our resources, which are at our disposal, could not be conserved, managed and developed in time. Many experts have warned that Nepal could be turned into a desert if deforestation were to be continued at the present pace.

But unfortunately, most of the development plans apparently attractive though they were, could not be materialised as people's participation was greatly ignored. Even those plans as could have been implemented successfully were initiated to fulfill the vested interest of a few persons or communities. Plans designed during the Panchayati system were never exposed to publicity and creative criticism in order to ensure people's participation in such plans and programmes.

As prone to keep things secret from the general public, the Panchayati system did not sufficiently publicize
anything about the design and implementation of the Master Plan which is closely concerned with the future of nearly twenty million Nepalese people and the state of global environment.

Despite great prominence given to deforestation and environmental issues in the Nepalese communication media, the master plan was not brought to lime light. With consolidation of people's faith in the elected government set up after the restoration of democracy, the present government is expected to make its functioning style much more transparent than ever before. But the expectation has remained unfulfilled, because the old bureaucratic system has not yet undergone any tangible change. Since there has not been any change in the country's bureaucracy and the outlook and attitude and the functioning style of the bureaucrats, the information disseminating system has not yet improved.

As a result of this, negative elements still predominate Nepalese journalism. With its immediate effect on Nepal and the Nepalese people the problem of deforestation neighbouring nations. It is, therefore, suggested that the donor agencies and neighbouring nations that are cooperating with the government in designing various forest conservation projects and other development plans and programmes, play an active role in effectively materialising the plans drawn up.

It is also evident that private sectors should play greater
roles in consideration of the fact that they, among other sectors. Government and international agencies, greatly contribute to the successful implementation of the 20-year Master Plan. No one can disagree with the important role mass communication media could play in activitising private sectors towards achieving the desired goals. With other preconditions set forth for professional growth of journalism, work efficiency and professional skills of journalists should be enhanced through periodical training exposures. Besides, it is also essential to make available resources necessary for healthy growth of journalism. It will not be an exaggeration to say that Nepal Press Institute and the Journalists are the only two institutions set up for launching various programmes for the benefit and welfare of the Nepalese journalists. These institutions have been conducting various programmes in cooperation with various donor agencies for the professional development of the Nepalese journalists. With the favourable situation created in the recent years, it seems as if a bright prospect were ahead of the Nepalese journalists.

To conclude, I would like to extend my heart-felt thanks to the organisers of the workshop for providing me this opportunity to participate in this workshop designed for enhancing the professional skills of reporters associated with environment. Such programmes, I feel fully confident, will prove useful for the journalists devoted to environment.
and environmental issues. Besides, journalists returning home from abroad will be further enthused to write and carry out research. To as the related area.