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Impact of Transnational Broadcasting on Regional Society and Culture from the viewpoint of Nepal

by

Rabindra Man Pradham
Impact of Transnational Broadcasting on Regional Society and Culture from the Viewpoint of Nepal

The last five years has seen a dramatic rise of the number of television households in Asia. It is estimated that the rise is over 70 percent. The rise within the last two years has been even greater indicating how TV broadcasting is sweeping this region.

Up until the last two years, TV broadcasting was limited to government organizations only, whether as fully fledged government media or in the form of corporations. What the viewers received was what these media fed. Because of its accountability to the Government, programmes ranged from entertainment, education to government propaganda. Quality productions seemed secondary as long as programming slots were filled up for the day. Even as massive changes in broadcasting was taking place in other parts of the world, broadcasting system in this region was creeping at a very slow pace. As the thirst of TV viewers grew, one way or the other people started working out ways to catch TV signals from their neighbouring country. Viewers in Nepal were beginning to switch to Doordarshan while viewers in India were switching to Bangladesh or Pakistan or Burma depending on the nearness of the viewers' region. Similarly chunks of Pakistani viewers tuned into Doordarshan while in the east Bangladesh viewers did the same. This is an example of how the viewers' thirst for variety programmes, if not better in quality, was growing each day.

In a way STAR TV via satellite came in, for a majority of the viewers, as a blessing in disguise. Dish antennas began to sprout even as more channels, totally dedicated to entertainment, joined the band wagon of transnational broadcasting with technical superiority and well made programmes. More and more people started buying dish antennas even as local community cable
operators took advantage of the situation to provide these channels to its members at a minimum rate as compared to the economic burden they would otherwise have to face to set up their own dish or be deprived of these foreign channels altogether. The regional governments now face a situation that is uncontrollable simply because technology has overtaken them. Now they face a competition that has slipped from their hands.

Entertainment is all that matters to an ordinary viewer—be it in the form of sex, violence or pure comedy. It is a simple fact that sex in one form or the other is able to draw more viewers; this is perhaps one of the reasons why foreign programmes are more popular. To an ordinary viewer, entertainment comes first, everything else takes a second place. He is hardly aware of the consequences that might effect him in the long run, nor does he really care. This is specially true where literacy rate is minimal. How can we expect an uneducated viewer to judge what he views on the TV when the ratio of judging a programme for its pros and cons is low even among the educated lot.

When we talk of the impact of transnational broadcasting in regional society and culture, do we take its advantages or disadvantages? Do we concentrate on the advantages or the disadvantages? It seems it is only right that we are first clear on what we should concentrate on. When we talk of society and culture, the topic is not only vast but highly debateable. It is not right for us to decide what one can see and what one cannot. It is up to the viewer to decide what is good for him and what is not. Is it possible or even democratic to stop viewers from watching what they want to see and what comes in free of charge?

The impact on society and culture in the pursuit for modernization and progress had already begun to show before transnational broadcasting entered this region. People were slowly discarding their ethnic tradition and aping the west whether one understood what one did or not; it came in form of
style and many have forgotten the value of their culture. The arrival of transnational broadcasting is certainly responsible for speeding up this degradation. The big question is where does the responsibility lie?

There are indeed many benefits that people have gained from transnational broadcasting. In context to Nepal, where its own TV network currently reaches only to 22 percent of the people, satellite TV is reaching places where it would take NTV another five years to do so if it expands its network only terrestrially. For the people living in these areas where there is some form of electricity either through small hydel plants or individual small generators, signals coming via satellite is what they can watch and learn from. A whole new world has suddenly been opened to them. Some of them probably do not even know the existence of their national network. Through the news channels, they now know what is happening around the world. Then there are the entertainment channels which they tune into most of the time. As the saying goes "a picture is worth a thousand words;" the rural mass learn as much as they can from what they see in the pictures and not necessarily from its narration. As a result they now know more about the outside world than they ever did before. This has certainly helped them towards their own development. However, it must be mentioned here that in most cases it is doubtful whether they really understand foreign culture. In many ways it helps them learn or be informed in a much quicker manner.

Among those who have receiving sets, it is easy to notice that they are now much more informed than earlier, changes in their social habits and culture are slowly but surely changing and given two more years when more than two dozen channels will be added to the existing ones, the viewers in this region will have many more choices to quench their thirst for more material.
Considering the size of the country, Nepal has diverse ethnic groups, languages, culture and tradition uniquely characterized by its blend in the everyday life of the people. The variety of culture and traditions found in the ethnic group, each different from the other in its character, is unique. However, they are slowly either vanishing or changing.

The country opened its doors to the outside world only a little over four decades ago. The influx of tourists and the people’s own experience with and exposure to the outside world has created a tremendous effect in the socio-cultural life-style of the people. Transnational broadcasting has recently acted as fuel to the fire in leaving tradition and culture behind in the pursuit for progress and modernization. As a result, the very identity of the ethnic tribes are being threatened. Nepal is still to the large extent incommunicable; its difficult geographical terrain makes communications by road or air extremely difficult and it may take many years before most of its remote areas become easily accessible. It is also difficult for the national television media to reach the population around these areas for the very same reason unless the use of satellite and TVROs are made. But financially, at present, it is a little difficult both in terms of hardware and software. Therefore, there is no way that the national media can compete with the channels from the sky or transmit its own related programmes in order to balance the otherwise one way information.

The majority of the population of rural Nepal have been and still are easily influenced for lack of education, be it through music, dances or through whatever else new that they see. Music, dances, dramas, soap operas etc. of the West which come via satellite day in and day out have specially made the younger generation totally ignore their own folk tradition and values and easily accept, without understanding, what is being fed to them. As mentioned earlier, entertainment is all that matters to an ordinary viewer. This is specially true in rural Nepal where BBC
might be tuned only once in a while if not at all whereas the entertainment channels are tuned constantly. One can easily notice how people have been influenced by watching them in their everyday life. Where once people gathered at a certain place for songs and dances of their own or even a chit chat to discuss their problems, they would now rather sit in front of a TV set. Crime of all sorts is on the increase and although we cannot totally blame transnational broadcasting, we cannot ignore the fact that it is very much involved.

Most Nepalese are already getting the cultural shock. It is difficult to foretell what might happen within the next two years when they will be bombarded with scores of new channels that will be added to the existing ones. It seems, the fashion now among the intellectuals in general and the intellectuals in the broadcast media is to talk about the impact of transnational broadcasting in the society of the region or a country and yet do nothing about it. It is indeed a herculean task for a small broadcasting organization, such as Nepal’s to provide programmes to its audience that could act as a check and balance to what comes to them via satellite. There is no way that a small organization can compete with such giant organizations that are looming over our heads in the sky.

What we must now consider is how best we can make use of transnational broadcasting without harming any society or culture. This is not an easy task. The face of the world changed after the Industrial Revolution; mankind benefitted a lot from it and ever since then the world has developed at a very rapid pace. But what is the price we have paid for it? We all know of the degradation of the environment; pollution in the sky; pollution in the waters; forest being depleted, and there is a hole in the ozone. Why was this side effect not thought of earlier? Similarly, are we not scared that the progress in communication specially transnational broadcasting will cause irreparable damage to our culture and society? Is it not time for us to look
at transnational broadcasting in this way rather than merely giving way to commercialism? Is it not time for us to sit with the transnational broadcasters in finding ways to use transnational broadcasting as a means to enjoy and learn and yet be able to retain our culture and with less harm to the society?