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Nepal: Role Of Media In Promotion Of Pluralism

By

Gopal Dass Shrestha
Nepal:

Role Of Media In Promotion Of Pluralism
-Gopal Dass Shrestha

To question whether media have a role in promoting pluralism is as good as asking if interaction has a role in sustaining a society. Just as human society itself is inconceivable in absence of interaction, pluralism is incomprehensible in absence of media in any modernising society. Likewise, modern media too is inconceivable in absence of pluralism.

The question therefore, is not whether or not such a media role exists; the question on the other hand, is whether this role is being fulfilled and how best it can be fulfilled.

Placing the issue in such a perspective, a few problems and even hurdles become at once evident.

The first problem concerns media structure itself. Being organised institutions, big or small, media have or come to have their own characteristics, including their own interests. If not properly tuned to the task of promoting pluralism, this constraint can render them unable to do full justice to their task of promoting pluralism. They may even start seeking to make their own impositions towards "consensus building". In the worst instance, their performance in information may deteriorate into a performance in propaganda. So, I think, media structure is of crucial importance in determining whether they remain tuned to their goal of promoting pluralism in the society.

The second important condition for media to be a vehicle of pluralism is the political environment. A political environment which is hostile to the growth of pluralism or which is simply confused or which is half-hearted in allowing pluralism, can hardly be conducive for a satisfactory performance on the part of media to acquit itself in achieving this goal. Such an environment can certainly provoke rebellion. Media may rebel. But that is a different story. Moreover, pluralism exercised as a rebellion and not as a normal performance, can create its own problems of communication.

The third condition for media to be effective in promoting pluralism is the socio-cultural and economic framework. In absence of an appropriate environment in these areas, media efforts towards pluralisation will tend to be inconsequential.

There can be a debate on whether media can ever have an ideal condition to promote pluralism. It also can be debated if it is not a part of media responsibility to create conducive conditions where they are absent.

In both these respects, media certainly have tasks to fulfill. If conditions are not helpful for their performance, then it is part of their job to improve them. But there is a limit beyond which this cannot be done. Media are a part of the society. They can be vehicles of change, they can even transcend their age but not beyond possibilities determined by given circumstances. One can only get shot if one were to talk of individual liberties under a Hitler. That can create a martyr but not a newspaper.

After making these observations, permit me now to assess Nepalese situation on the above bases.

Structurally, it will be seen that barring the Government-owned media organisations, almost all are small units with very limited resources.

The Government-owned media have a greater reach, but being structurally handicapped thus, promoting pluralism is not their food. In this category come Radio Nepal which technically covers almost the whole of the country, Nepal Television, Rastriya Samachar Samiti which is the country's only news agency and two dailies The Gorkhapatra and The Rising Nepal.

Starving for resources, small print media organisations in the private sector, can contribute little to the overall process of pluralisation, although their societal impact in limited areas is significant.

What constitutes a telling commentary on the state of affairs is that whereas around 40 percent of the country's total population are officially acknowledged as literate which in absolute terms would mean around 8 million people, the total circulation of Nepalese newspapers do not exceed three hundred thousand in any case.
It will be seen therefore, that be it for structural reasons or for any other reasons mentioned or overlooked above, the role of Nepalese media in promoting pluralism remains severely limited.

How do we get over this situation? One of the ways will be to work for structural changes. The Government media may, for example, be privatised. But inspite of its democratic professions, His Majesty's Government has shown little inclination to think along these lines, although once in a while, we come across talks about possibilities of state-owned print media being privatised. The Government has recently encouraged private FM radio stations to be set up. But none of them has yet come into being, as the Government continues to drag its foot after making the preliminary decisions.

Coming to the private sector, one of the ways to strengthen its capacity will be to encourage merger of various smaller organisations to form bigger ones. What they lack in resources can be got over to some extent through teaming up of human resources and coordination of existing physical resources. With both their credibility and organisational strength enhanced in this manner, they will thus be set on the course of more effective participation in the process of building pluralism. Being democratised structure-wise also, they will be more viable agencies in coping with their task.

A sense of proportion while thus enlarging the organisations will however, be desirable. How big can an organisation grow without adversely affecting its primary objective? An organisation bigger than what is necessary for the given purpose can tend to be counter-productive, for the simple reason that it may become more and more impersonal, grow its own interest roots and deviate from its original purpose. Growth carried to such an extent may be spectacular but it may be self-defeating. It can make even performance of journalistic freedom problematic. Once in a while, we come across stories how crises breed in the relation between editors and publishers, between editors and management, with freedom of expression becoming invariably the first casualty. I think a sense of proportion which visualises optimum condition where freedom can best perform itself is therefore highly important. We are not after building a tyranny of media to replace the tyranny of politicians. In course of trying to promote pluralism, it is not our business to impose "consensus" on the society and hand it out as some readymade consumer product but to participate in pluralism and facilitate it.

But as I have said above, some necessary minimum conditions must be available for even such strengthened media to do justice to its performance in social responsibility. Again, as I have said, the media too have a role to play in changing these conditions but in absence of understanding from other concerned quarters, they can do only so much and no more.

Article 16 of Nepal's constitution, for example, ensures people's right to information but if even for simple informations one has to go on waging a struggle, then the media will be naturally handicapped in fulfilling its role in this regard. Again, if the musclemen of political parties are set upon media personnel for having differed, the atmosphere cannot but be vitiated. Such incidents have not been altogether rare.

These are only a few instances to show how conditions enabling media to perform their responsibilities can be denied. There are several other possible situations which can likewise raise hurdles on the way of media performance for the furtherance of the cause of pluralism.

There have, of course, been some drawbacks on the part of Nepalese print media in the private sector also which must be taken into account. One of them is that they are overwhelmingly urban-based, and also equally overwhelmingly political and elitist.

Little attempt worth any mention has been made so far to extend their coverage to rural and semi-rural areas. The bulk of the country's population is thus left out. Improvements in this situation will have to be made if their performance is to be more effective.

One of the biggest hurdles in this regard is continued absence of any dependable and organised national network to facilitate distribution of newspapers and other periodicals. As a result of this, local agents have been having a field day, many of whom usually default on payments. Collecting sales proceeds has remained a big challenge. With little advertisement revenue because of overall underdevelopment of the economy and also unhelpful official attitude, uncertainties regarding sales proceeds too are enough to dampen the enthusiasm of any entrepreneur however optimistic.
Yet another severe constraint which private sector publishers are feeling is in regard to financial resources. Bank lending rates hover around 19 percent which makes a sharp contrast with 4 to 5 percent interest rate at which loans are available to Japanese newspapers, for example. Even the long-term loan from Nepal Industrial Development Corporation carries an interest rate of around 15 percent. This discourages even highly interested quarters to make investments in this area for its growth.

Things remaining the same, therefore, it is difficult to visualise how any quick improvement can be envisaged in the effectiveness of Nepalese print media in promoting pluralism. Which in other words, means that some or the other development intervention will be necessary if this role is to be more satisfactorily fulfilled.

On closer scrutiny, therefore, it will be found that more than anything else, it is persisting reluctance on the part of the regime to create more propitious conditions for improved media performance which lies at the heart of the problem.

One feel compelled to make this note because the Government still controls and/or influences the nation's life to a large measure, notwithstanding its professions regarding decentralisation. Still in the process of emerging from an old socio-cultural and economic milieu, the overall situation is still reminiscent of a rather closed society. Even status symbols are still associated with state power. Functioning in such a twilight of obscurantism and modernism, those who happen to be in authority have never been found entirely free from the temptation of reducing the fourth estate into a handmaiden even as they shout hoarse about the freedom of press and how important it is for the sustenance and consolidation of democracy. The resultant hypocrisy has created an unreal world where the authorities, so to say, pretend to acknowledge the necessity of the growth of national media, and the media pretend to believe in it.

One net result of this situation has been that a cloud of ever darkening cynicism has come to hang over the environment. As I noted above, situations like these can build antagonisms and rebellions but they cannot proper conditions for the media to grow, be self-confident and contribute to the process of pluralisation. It can be a struggle for pluralisation or for opening the gates to pluralisations but in that course, it can also engender its own rigidities, creating new problems of communication.

Revolutions and struggles may have a romantic aura surrounding them. It can throw up heroes and villains. But they are, in many ways, signs of backwardness in our thinking and behaviour also. They occur only when communication between minds ceases and/or when reason is taken over by other considerations.

At first look, it does not seem necessary that such things should persist at this point of human history. Human intelligence has advanced so much that the classical seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth upheavals have been logically rendered outmoded and unnecessary. But there always happen to be pockets of backwardness, where this mainstream perception of civilizational development does not apply. May be this corner of the world is more or less, one of such very pockets. And then psychologically, we have, each of us, our own attitudinal and mental airpockets, so to say, where ideas plunge when they try to fly. Problems of communication again. But to open up is the business of masscommunication. There does not therefore, seem to be much ground to complain although there still continues to be enough uphill journey for the Nepalese press to cover to earn its qualification as a resourceful agency to satisfactorily fulfill its social responsibilities.