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Role Of Press Institutes In Promoting Media Pluralism

By

Bharat D Koirala
Role of Press Institutes in promoting media pluralism

The dawn of the final decade of the twentieth century saw dramatic political changes in many parts of the world. While the fall of communism and subsequent political, social and economic changes continue to cause major upheavals in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe, similar changes in South Asia have been quite sweeping even though with less turmoil. Presently, the South Asian region is on the threshold of a new democratic order with the governments in most of these countries involved in consolidating democracies ushered in through people's power. Nepal experienced its share of this dramatic political change sweeping the whole region in 1990 when a popular agitation for democracy forced the King to transfer sovereignty to the people under a democratic constitution, thereby ending a thirty-year rule of the partyless panchayat system that gave the king absolute power.

Revival or re-establishment democracy itself cannot be expected to guarantee an era of democratic stability. Democracy is not merely a form of government or the election of people's representatives. It entails a change in attitudes, it expects a sharing of thoughts and ideas in a spirit of give and take, it thrives on pluralism and human values, it believes in consultation and consensus. It, therefore, requires patient nurturing of these essentially fragile democratic processes as they go through a phase of transition from an authoritarian to a democratic order. In Nepal, as in some of the other countries of the region, uncertainties remain regarding the future of multi-party democracy in the face of entrenched vested interests in authoritarianism. In the light of this issue of people's participation in the democratic process, party pluralism, decentralization of power and regional imbalances will have to receive much attention in the coming years. Fragile political institutions, intra and inter-party squabbles, coalition politics, domestic unrest and lack of consensus on fundamental social, economic and political agendas continue to pose the most serious challenge to the nascent democracy.

It is, thus evident that the mass media more so than other sections of society must continue to play a very important role in promoting and protecting democracy as it did in ushering in a new political system in the recent people's movements. To cope with these new challenges the press in these countries needs fundamental restructuring, induction of new technology and development of more innovative alternative media particularly in order to make itself more relevant and effective in mobilizing the masses of people in the democratic process. In Nepal, for instance the reach of the printed press is extremely limited due to geographical and economic factors. With the vast majority of the people cut off from the political debates and totally ignorant of their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society the newly won democracy remains extremely fragile. There can be no democracy without participation and no participation without communication. In the absence of an independent, vibrant and pluralistic media a democratic environment cannot be created. The fact that there are many conflicts of interests, real and imagined, manifest and potential, minimizes the likelihood that any one will cause serious problems. Pluralism makes room for writers with loyalties to opposing points of view. It is the duty of the press to keep the pluralistic pot bubbling by attending to the variety of view points and interests. 
represented within their spaces. If conflict of interest cannot be eradicated it can at least be managed.

The situation is further compounded by the fact that in all of the South Asian countries the reach of the printed medium is extremely limited due to a number of common factors. The press has always been an urban phenomenon, published from the national or provincial capitals and distributed within the city limits and the periphery and meant principally for the country's elites. In its appearance, coverage and distribution pattern the press has been and largely continues to be highly elitist. Justification for this has been found in the arguments that the two-thirds of the people living in the rural areas are largely illiterate, too poor to buy newspapers and generally not interested in reading about the world around them. The fact that more and more people have been drawn into the political mainstream, that their purchasing power has increased and that literacy rates in most countries are going up are completely ignored. Even in countries with a very large number of newspapers and journals the total circulation is disproportionately low compared to the population. The largest and most influential publications are those that emanate from the national or state capitals. Most newspapers are filled with national and international political news of little or no relevance to the rural population. The rural press is almost non-existent in South Asia. There are some small newspapers that come out of little towns and cities usually published by journalists with a deep sense of dedication and pride under very harsh conditions. These papers have a small circulation, no advertising, use small obsolete letter press machines and hand-composition and operate on shoe-string budgets. They cannot be considered good business enterprise. The newspapers merely give the editors some social status. They have no impact.

Having had the privilege of closely observing the functioning of media institutions in South Asia I feel the press institutes have been and should continue to remain the best medium for promoting a strong and healthy press in the respective countries. A survey of the press institutes in Asia conducted in 1992 while preparing for the first workshop of the press institutes of Asia in Kathmandu found that these institutes share common objectives, namely to develop a more professional, more responsible, and more economically viable press. Their efforts in training, research and publications are directed at meeting these needs. With very limited resources they are able to achieve much more than large journalism departments of universities. The press institutes also have to their advantage an extensive network not only within the mass media about also in the academic community, the government, among NGOs and other media institutions. All of the institutes were found to be willing to do more for their national press than they were doing due to lack of sufficient resources. And, again due to lack of adequate resources they had not been able to collaborate with each other in joint or regional programmes. In the light of these, the Asian Press Institute workshop held in Kathmandu in November 1992 with the assistance of UNESCO called for increased resources to develop the press and strengthen its capability especially the relatively weaker provincial or district press. It also called for: developing the capacity of women journalists, promoting investigative reporting, issuing more publications, and carrying out research reports and surveys,
training of trainers, publication of wall newspapers and setting up of databases and documentation centres.

Considering this very important role of the press institutes and similar media organizations in promoting media pluralism it becomes necessary for these institutions to find ways and means of reaching the masses in order to draw them into the political mainstream. As long the vast majority of the people remain cut off from national debates and are not drawn into the process of consultation democracy cannot be effective. The Nepal Press Institute is presently involved in a number of programmes designed to promote media pluralism through a community-based media. Here are some examples:

1. Wall newspaper. Gaon Ghar is a wall newspaper sent out to small farmer groups and NGOs in all 75 districts of the country to enable even neo-literates to find suitable reading material in areas where mainstream newspapers do not reach. Printed in bold type with pictures and graphics the newspaper is pasted on walls of public buildings, schools and tea shops. The NPI initiative has led to the establishment of more and more such newspapers in Nepal and in the region.

2. Community newspaper. The first truly community newspaper has begun to come out in Palpa district of western Nepal. Using modern computer and offset printing technology the paper is published by the people of Palpa, news and features are mainly of Palpa and the readership in the community is growing day by day. Plans have been drawn to establish more such newspapers in pockets of high literacy in the more remote parts of the country.

3. Community broadcasting. NPI is involved in the establishment of the first private FM radio station in Nepal. Working in collaboration with like-minded agencies like the Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists, Worldview International Foundation and Himal Magazine preparatory work is presently underway to start broadcasting in the near future.

4. Feature Services. Working in cooperation with Inter Press Service, Panos Institute and UNICEF, Nepal Press Institute has three feature services (in Nepali) that provide development features to about 100 newspapers in different parts of the country.

5. District level training. While NPI’s training programmes were initially held in Kathmandu they have now been largely decentralized. More and more journalists working in the districts are attending skill-development training programmes that are now held in district capitals. In order to make this more permanent two Journalism Resources Centres are being established in the eastern and western parts of the country.

6. Press Development Fund. In order to help the small and needy newspapers to find capital either to modernize themselves or to operate more efficiently NPI is working on scheme to establish a press development fund with assistance from DANIDA. This again is to help the less-endowed private press in Nepal.

In order to promote media pluralism I feel that those of us who are involved in the running of press institutes or similar institutions in the region should pay attention to the following:
1. Strengthening of the private sector media

In most countries a strong government media functions alongside the private sector media. In a democracy it is the private media that should promote freedom of expression.

2. Alternative media

In the light of the failure of mainstream media to reach the rural masses alternative media must be developed to raise the awareness of the people of their rights and responsibilities in a democracy. These media can become effective instruments in the development process. They can also become the best yardsticks for assessing public opinion.

3. Decentralized training programmes

Take training programmes where they are needed most. In most cases it is the journalists working in the smaller towns and villages that need training most.

4. Promote specialized journalistic skills

Most journalism training programmes in the region are of general nature that include simply how to write and edit effectively. More advanced or specialized training is essential to encourage journalists to specialize and make their writing more effective.

5. Develop Management Skills

Training in the management of newspaper as a business, newsroom management, newspaper production management, capital and financial management and advertising are areas that need attention in promoting private, independent and pluralistic media that are economically viable.

6. Training to adapt to new political climate

Dramatic changes in political and economic systems require corresponding changes in the orientation of the press. This can be done only through a training programme that considers such vital subjects as: freedom of the press, elements of a democratic government, concept of a market economy, etc.

On the regional front I see the need for greater networking among the press institutes and other institutions established to promote regional cooperation in the field of mass media development. One such example is South Asia Media Association (SAMA). I feel press institutes should work closely with SAMA in achieving its goal of promoting increased cooperation among SAARC countries in this field. Steps should also be taken to strengthen AMIC so that it is able to organize more and more programmes of a regional nature for the benefit of mass media in all of the countries.

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