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Social And Cultural Factors Affecting Pluralism In South Asia

By

Josefina O Dhungana
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS AFFECTING PLURALISM IN SOUTH ASIA

Josefina O. Dhungana

Many of us may tend to underestimate the influence of social and cultural factors in promoting pluralism, in all its manifestations, to a given society. We normally think that the major influence are economic and political. This paper basically focuses on the social and cultural perspective in relation to the promotion of pluralism and the media's role, with special accent to Nepal. To start with, let me present few premises from which my discussions are based.

Pluralism and Participatory Democracy

"Pluralism" has been defined as a state or condition of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, social or political groups maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization. Countries, such as the United States and Canada, are called pluralistic because public and private groups have legitimacy and can affect the way the country is run. Groups representing the interests of business, farming, labour, ethnic or racial segments of society work with public government to develop public policy. Each group exerts pressure on the other and on public governments. Together, they produce balancing pressures that keep a single group from taking over.

In a pluralistic setting, government decisions are made through negotiations and compromise among social groups concerned, with each group having something closely approaching a veto for any proposed policy that may run counter to its interests. Scholars believe that pluralism prevents direct confrontation between clashing interests, helps aggregate demands, reduces levels of political homility and maximizes the stability and internal calm of the system. Anti-authoritarian advocates of pluralism insist on the need for independent associations in political, social and economic life. They contested the monopoly of power of the state and insisted on pluralism as a necessary ingredient of the democracy they aspired to.

On the other hand, democratic pluralists contend that in some cases, the more associations/groups created in the name of democracy and plurality, there is likely tendency to stabilize inequalities, deform civic consciousness by exaggerating group interests, distort the public agenda and alienate some control over decisions from the general public to the groups themselves. Political scholars assert that yet because social pluralism is necessary, inevitable and desirable in a democratic order, associations/groups cannot be destroyed without destroying democracy itself. As with individuals, so with associations: independence or autonomy, though necessary to a

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good life, also creates an opportunity for individuals to do harm. Like individuals, associations ought to possess some autonomy and at the same time, ways should be found to eliminate or reduce the harm they might cause. How best to achieve a desirable balance between autonomy and control is then, a fundamental problem of pluralist democracy.

In recent years, many countries underwent dramatic socio-political changes, which have affected, in few cases, significantly altered, a major part of the globe. Newly independent republics emerged, many others had an upsurge against authoritarianism, while other parliamentary democracies are still undergoing difficult process of consolidation. Nevertheless, these paved the way for significant socio-economic reforms, with strong bias for the private sector, liberal investment policies, and the expansion of the market forces. Many countries, including Nepal, Philippines and Bangladesh, had the media, particularly the alternative media, largely contributing to the changes in the political structure. Marcos' fall in 1986, the end of the Ershad regime in 1990, and the people-propelled change from party-less to multi-party democracy in Nepal, all immediately saw almost a four-fold increase in the number of dailies and weeklies published. In Nepal, the political change also brought about a sudden mushrooming of groups, associations, unions, institutions and development groups like NGOs. These groups, while healthy to a pluralistic democracy and are greatly influencing the pace of development of Nepal, but as mentioned earlier, to reduce the negative impacts that may in one way or another occur, some directions on achieving a balance between autonomy and control must be defined before it is too late.

In pluralistic societies, interaction among interest groups is a way of forming public opinion. As a vision, it is said that "participatory democracy" allows diverse views to be expressed and decisions to be made through popular discussions of issues and registration of preferences by all sectors. This is where the media come in strongly. Media facilitate agenda-setting and the formation of public opinion.

Socio-cultural Perspective of Media and Pluralism

Culture comprises the arts, which are further sub-divided into the performing arts (music, dance and theater), the literary arts (poetry, fiction, essay, drama) and the visual arts (painting, sculpture, photography, architecture); mass media (radio, television, film, the print media); education (primary, secondary, tertiary and professional); and religion.

In bringing about a society, culture plays a pivotal role. While culture is said to be the collective expression of a people's conception of a world, it is also that which shapes a people's collective consciousness. Beliefs, normally associated with the social and cultural norms of a society, and perceptions nurture certain values and attitudes which in turn mold a people's character and greatly influence their will towards giving form and substance to the society of their aspirations.

Through the various forms or manifestations of culture, and the socio-economic make up of the country in general, the people of a given society express their ideas, values and emotions. The extent however to which these forms of cultural expressions are utilized to promote pluralism, is wide and varied. Mass media, education, and the literary arts, in this order, have more far reaching influence in the promotion of pluralism. As mentioned earlier, media facilitate agenda-setting and the formation of public opinion which strengthen the establishment and preservation of a democratic pluralism.
Many critics posit that mass media have far reaching effects, in terms of education and information, mostly to the middle and upper income class. These groups essentially become the "gatekeepers" of information and transform their access to media into "power". As is true in most developing countries, not only in Nepal, the economically poor, and socially disadvantaged (low or no education, no access to basic amenities etc.), are consequently the "media poor" as they are continually denied the means of articulating aspirations and thus, their views do not find expression in the national agenda. In fact, many scholars believe that media are partly responsible as they have, to a large extent, supported (and therefore perpetuated) the present imbalances.

Education in Nepal, on the other hand, while it has been advancing over the last few years, still has to improve qualitatively. Education has a direct influence in promoting pluralism. At the 1991 election campaigning, DECORE/AMIC's study showed that exposure to mass media coverage is selective and that those who watch, listen to or read a lot about election-related information tend to be the better educated and the politically interested and active, and to a certain extent, politically partisan. Education was also found to be positively correlated with decision-making related to voting.

With the new found freedom that brought about new initiatives and new ways of thinking, the institutes of higher learning in Nepal has also been active venues of promoting plurality of views. On the other hand, again with lack of proper directions, campuses are deviating from its focus of institutes for learning, rather they become too politicized that a student or professor who is not affiliated with any ideology or political group, is branded as a fence-sitter.

To a certain extent, the Nepalese literary arts has slowly include the development of a national collective consciousness in its various themes in the essays, poetries and dramas. The performing arts, the visual arts and religion have not been well tapped in the promotion of pluralism in Nepal, although these too, have much great potential as media of encouraging plurality of views among its audiences and constituents. Nepal is also rich in traditional or folk media, such as the gainis, dohori geet, etc. While these artistic expressions were used to a limited extent for development messages, but with such poor knowledge base about them, it is not known whether a potentially effective human resource is largely being ignored by communication planners.

Karl Deutsch, in National and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality, called communication the "web of government" to underscore the role that communication plays in the process of governance - the leaders and the people interacting through communication that could lead to genuine democracy and effective government. Where communication is mass-based and participatory, societies tend to be truly dynamic and progressive; where communication is only for the elite and rigidly controlled, such a society is weak and wracked by social conflicts.

From the theory of mass society, we are aware of the interdependence of institutions that exercise power and the integration of media into sources of social power. Content is therefore likely to serve the interests of political and economic power holders. The voices which survive belong to those least likely to criticize prevailing distribution of wealth and power. Those who challenge these arrangements are unable to publicize their dissent or opposition because they cannot command the resources needed for effective communication. (McQuail, 1983)
Indeed, with liberalization and democratization, for example, in most of the former Communist countries, and in Nepal, for that matter, through their newly formed associations, many groups gained a voice, an influence, and a degree of freedom in political life they had hitherto been denied; at the same time, the interests and goals advanced by some groups were seen by others as clearly harmful. Thus the introduction of pluralism inevitably brought with it the need to confront the inescapable dilemmas of pluralist democracy. This also manifest in the emergence of new publications, and the opening to the private sector of the electronic media of radio and television, which are otherwise state-controlled over the past years. Many publications are said to be financed by interest groups - mainly business and political. This emerging ownership pattern, has to a large extent affected freedom, responsibility, and editorial independence of media in general, particularly those which were launched after the political changes.

Another issue is the urban bias of the present mass media, which is often unable to reach the majority of the population, and even if they do, their predominant message is shaped by urban-oriented media planners. This tendency has not only inhibited regional participation in national affairs and regional expression of viewpoint on both local and national issues and affairs, and often tending to impose to these areas what Kathmandu considers as major national issues. Radio and television broadcasts do little to help the geographic isolation of the various ethnic and occupational groups, and to bridge the gap between them. Thus, most of us, urban media consumers, are perpetually ignorant of their cultures and aspirations.

How then can a thriving and healthy democratic pluralism flourish when such imbalances in the means to create collective consciousness exist?

One way is by decentralizing the media, vis-a-vis active people's involvement. Regions must be encouraged to create/establish their own media structures and programmes, and local print media material providers, which would tackle issues of regional concern and urgency, in relation to national concern. These community-based and participatory structures for the decentralization of information have a parallel effect in broadening access to information and in promoting plurality of views.

Even the media entertainment programmes can be both educative and entertaining by providing themes about their problems and about characters that people are familiar with and can identify in their daily lives. Media content must therefore be demystified by removing the traditional prejudices and biases, and the replacement of an idealist world view with one that observes and creatively interprets the concrete realities of our society, including the present social conditions and relationships. Demystifying the media should also include departing from time-worn formulas, conventions and genres of the melodrama, the Indianish song-and-dance genre, action and slapstick comedy, and instead venturing on programmes and other formats/presentations that provide fresh insights and viewpoints, thus stimulating critical thinking, even while entertaining. The local comedy duos of Madan Kririshna and Hari Bansha initiated a new and commendable approach of using comedy in informing people about current political issues and development concerns in their audio, video and drama versions.

The various options offered by the new communication technologies -computer hook ups and data retrieval systems, satellite communication are directly affecting how most Asian countries are functioning. Access to most foreign and new local television channels, is now within a "dish-reach" in Kathmandu, and later in the districts of Nepal with the advent of satellite broadcasting soon. If programmes from outside can no longer be barred, one strategy is to multiply the local programming that cater to local values, tastes and cultures, and to
multiply the choices from within the country using cable systems. On the other hand, despite the influx of trans-continental media, we do not have sound research, neither have we initiated at all, at least for Nepal, to know the extent of their reach and influence. I feel that this august gathering can address this issue of conducting some research related to this so that we can chart out a media education at all audience levels focusing on developing their ability to make responsible choices among media alternatives, to put, what one sees, hears or reads in proper perspective. In short, to be critical. The most effective defense against imported programmes is to develop discriminating and critical capabilities of viewers so that they may adapt and select ideas and content according to their needs and to the society's demands.

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