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Summary Of Proceedings

By

Virgilio Labrador
SEMINAR ON MEDIA AND PLURALISM IN SOUTH ASIA

March 22 - 24, 1994
Kathmandu, Nepal

Prepared by

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SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

Introduction

This report summarizes the proceedings of the Seminar on "Media and Pluralism in South Asia" held in Kathmandu, Nepal from 22-24 March 1994. The seminar was organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), in cooperation with the Nepal Press Institute with the support of the Asia Foundation.

The objectives of the seminar was to review mass media coverage of topics and issues concerning cultural and political pluralism in South Asia; review national communication policies and legal frameworks that affect the development of pluralistic societies in South Asia; examine the role of professional media associations and alternative media organizations in promoting pluralism in the region; and come up with actionable recommendations on how to strengthen the role of media in promoting pluralism in the region.

Twenty-two senior editors, journalists, scholars and communications professionals participated in the three-day meeting. The seminar programme included panel discussions and case studies of experiences from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In the final day of the seminar, the participants were divided into two working groups which formulated recommendations based on the seminar deliberations.

(see Appendix A for the conference programme and Appendix B for the list of participants).

Tuesday, March 22, 1994

OPENING CEREMONIES

The opening ceremonies was attended by the Secretary-General of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Mr. Y.K. Silwal, with the Nepalese Minister of State for Information and Communication, Mr. V. K. Gachhadar as the Chief Guest.

Mr. Vijay Menon, AMIC Secretary-General, in his welcome remarks, said that South Asia with its diversity of languages, religions and cultures has every reason to accept and encourage the concept of pluralism. He said that media pluralism should be considered from the standpoint of the countries of the region and examine how a pluralistic media can be a positive force in furthering development.

Mr. Y.K. Silwal, SAARC Secretary-General, said that promoting pluralism at a broader regional level is crucial to building closer South Asian regional cooperation. He noted the present trend in South Asia towards the strengthening of democratic processes and
institutions has resulted in the growth of political pluralism based on multi-party democracy.

Minister V.K. Gachhadar, in his inaugural address, commended the seminar organizers for choosing Nepal as the venue of a very timely and relevant topic. Mr. Gachhadar emphasized the important role played by the media in promoting pluralism. He also stressed Nepal commitment to the promotion of a pluralistic society based on a constitutional monarchy and multi-party democracy.

Javed Jabbar, chairman of the South Asian Media Association, in his keynote speech, noted that the absence of comprehensive communication policies in South Asian countries is a reflection of the reluctance of the political parties and the establishment to fully absorb the principles of pluralism. He said that the scale and spread of changes in the media are making policies obsolete, making it necessary to evolve policies and frameworks that are flexible and pertinent to the realities in the South Asian context. Policies and frameworks should be developed in South Asia that are indigenous and innovative rather than universal, according to Mr. Jabbar.

The opening ceremonies was attended by sixty-five representatives from government, non-government, academic and media organizations from Kathmandu.

SESSION I

Mr. G.D. Shrestha, editor of The Commoner, chaired the first session on "National Communication Policies and Frameworks Affecting Pluralism."

Sai Paranjpye, a filmmaker from India, said that while India’s constitution guarantees liberty of thought, expression, belief and worship, India has still a long way to go in institutionalising pluralism. She enumerated instances where good intentions have in the development of the media towards enlightenment and education have come to naught such as the Satellite Instruction Television experiment (SITE). Ms. Paranjpye said that in order for a policy of pluralism to be institutionalised in India a kind of cultural democracy is a prerequisite.

Lasantha Wickrematunge, an advocate and former editor of the Sunday Times in Sri Lanka, said that as a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural country, Sri Lanka recognises the concept of pluralism in its constitution. However, he states that the constitution leaves a lot of gray areas which raises some doubts as to the seriousness of the government in safeguarding the principles enshrined in the constitution. For instance, the constitution can be very vague about the official national language. Mr. Wickrematunge also decries the fact that Sri Lanka does not have a national communication policy as such, apart from general provisions in the constitution protecting freedom of speech and expression. He also cited the government’s control of the largest newspaper chains in the country and of the electronic media, both radio and television.

B.B. Karki, an advocate from Nepal, stated that the Nepali constitution guarantees not only freedom of opinion and expression but also the right of press and publication in "absolute terms." He said that the Nepali constitution contains salient provisions that are "committed to preserve, protect and promote" pluralism. However, he said national communication policies should be evolved in Nepal that are in line with constitutional
provisions.

Dr. Tawhidul Anwar, Director-General of the Press Institute of Bangladesh, affirmed as with the other presentations the existence of constitutional provisions in Bangladesh guaranteeing the freedom of thought and conscience, which is widely interpreted to include freedom of the press and religion. He said that in Bangladesh, they have the cultural heritage and the media structures conducive to pluralism. However, Bangladesh needs to develop comprehensive national communication policies in keeping with the changes in the media environment in Bangladesh.

Kinley Dorji, editor of Kuensel newspaper in Bhutan, described the Bhutanese media as in a nascent stage of development. Initiated by the government, the one newspaper and radio station in the country has been recently privatized in order to promote the growth the media in Bhutan. As the mass media is a relatively new phenomenon in Bhutan, national communication policies still have to be developed. However, Mr. Dorji says that there is a tradition of tolerance and reverence for balance of views that is conducive to pluralism in Bhutan.

Ibrahim Mohamed, columnist of the Haveeru daily in the Maldives, said that while the Maldivian constitution guarantees freedom of the press, it qualifies freedom as "so long as it does not contravene the provision of Shariah Law." Mr. Mohamed explained that pluralism exists in the Maldives to the extent that the tenets and principles of Islam are not diminished in any way. He said that this should be viewed positively rather than negatively within the context of a homogenous nation such as the Maldives.

SESSION II

Prof. Sajid chaired the session on "The Role of Media Institutions in Promoting Pluralism: Perspectives from the Print Media".

Nilratan Haldar, assistant editor of the Daily Star of Bangladesh, outlined the pivotal role of the print media in Bangladesh in the liberation struggle and in the post-independence struggle to institute democratic government. Judging from the numbers alone, with 209 dailies and 644 weeklies, it appears that there is a pluralistic press in Bangladesh, according to Mr. Haldar. However, he said that repressive laws instituted during the dictatorial regimes in the 70's are still in force such as the Printing and Publications Ordinance of 1973 and some provisions of the Special Powers Act of 1974. Moreover, the largest newspapers are controlled by the government and the others are dependent on government advertising revenue. Lately, however, there have been an number of very vocal and active dailies sprouting up in Bangladesh that are setting a new trend in local journalism. In sum, he said that there are very encouraging signs that the press in Bangladesh, just at it has played a very important role in the liberation struggle, will continue to play a pivotal role in promoting pluralism.

Mr. G.D. Shrestha, editor of The Commoner, in his presentation said that in Nepal, as in most countries, media plays a very important role in promoting pluralism. However, he said that the press in Nepal face constraints in carrying out its role of promoting political
and cultural pluralism, due to the control of government of the largest newspapers in Nepal. Except for government-owned media organizations, Nepalese print and broadcast media are largely small and wanting in resources. The Nepalese media is also mostly urban-based. According to Mr. Shrestha, the government has already adopted a policy to privatise the media, but little has been done to implement it. Small print media organizations need a more conducive environment for their development in order for a truly pluralistic press to evolve in Nepal, said Mr. Shrestha.

SESSION III

Ms. Namrata Sharma of the Independent weekly in Nepal, chaired the session on "The Role of Media Institutions in Promoting Pluralism: Perspectives from the Broadcast Media."

Mr. M.I. Chowdhury, Joint Secretary of the Bangladesh Ministry of Information, stressed in his presentation that the role of broadcast institutions in Bangladesh should promote economic equity, social justice, cultural harmony and sustainable development. The widespread problems of illiteracy and poverty in Bangladesh should be addressed by the electronic media through the production of relevant and educational programmes, according to Mr. Chowdhury.

Mr. Ariya Rubasinghe, Deputy Director General of the Sri Lankan Rupavahini Corporation (SLBC), traced the history of broadcasting in Sri Lanka, which up until two years ago was a government monopoly. The introduction of private broadcasting entities such as MTV and the Asian Business News (ABN), however, has forced SLBC to re-examine its programming policies in order to be more competitive. He said that being in a pluralistic society, SLBC has placed a very high priority in promoting pluralism in its programming. Telecast time in SLBC is distributed among Sri Lanka's major ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. Various political parties are also given equal air time in SLBC.

Sonam Tshong, executive director of the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), said that radio in Bhutan played an important role in the transition process Bhutan underwent in the last thirty years from an isolated kingdom to a modern society. The BBS itself, has also undergone a major transition from a government entity to an autonomous corporation. Being a relatively new organization, the BBS is still evolving its policies. The BBS, however, adheres to the basic tenets of journalism such as fair, accurate and balanced reporting. Since it became autonomous, the BBS has been increasingly professionalising its operations, but are hampered by resource limitations. On the national level, no legal or regulatory measures exists relating to the electronic media, according to Mr. Tshong.

Wednesday, March 23, 1994

SESSION IV

Dr. Tawhidul Anwar chaired the session on "Ethical Standards: The Role of Press Institutes in Promoting Pluralism."

Lakshman Gunasekara, news editor of the Islands Sunday Edition in Sri Lanka, said
that ethnic and political divisions in Sri Lanka has stifled the development of a pluralistic press. The divisiveness characterizing Sri Lanka has also prevented the development of a press institute in Sri Lanka, according to Mr. Gunasekara. In the absence of a legitimate press institute, various organizations such as the Free Media Movement have stepped up to espouse issues such as press pluralism.

Prof. Zakariyya Sajid, Director-General of the Pakistan Press Institute, stressed the important role of press institutes, particularly in Pakistan, in promoting pluralism through undertaking research, training, media monitoring and advocacy functions. He noted, however, that the Pakistan Press Institute suffers from lack of support from government and newspaper owners. Prof. Sajid said there is a need for regional organizations such as AMIC to continue the regional coordination work that they have been doing with the different press institutes in South Asia.

Mr. Gokul Pokhrel, Secretary of the Nepal Press Institute (NPI), presented the paper in behalf of the NPI Director-General, Mr. Bharat Koirala, who was ill. In his paper Mr. Koirala reiterated the press institute’s role in strengthening private sector media and alternative media and developing journalistic and management skills among media personnel. In Nepal, Mr. Koirala enumerated the various projects being undertaken by the NPI aimed at developing small community media such as the setting up of training centres at the district level. Mr. Koirala also stressed the role of the press in Nepal in ensuring the stability of its newly-formed democratic government through the promoting of people’s participation and decentralization of power.

SESSION V

Lakshman Gunasekera chaired the session on "Social and Cultural Factors Affecting Pluralism in South Asia."

Mr. P. Murari, chairman of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, said that India has had a long history and tradition pluralism. Pluralistic principles are entrenched in the Indian constitution. However, he noted that for the media to be an effective catalyst of pluralism it has to encourage more participation and be more professional. Technology, which is rapidly changing the nature of the media, should also be used effectively. He said that the cultural and social environment should facilitate the collective self-expression of the peoples’ aspirations.

Josephine Dhungana, managing director of DECORE Consultancy Group in Nepal, said that concentration of media ownership in Nepal among the largely urban-based elites and the government has not promoted access to the majority of the population mainly residing in the rural areas. The content of Nepalese media must also be demystified by removing the traditional prejudices and biases and depart from the idealistic representations and time-worn formulas and conventions for it to be relevant. To have more critical media consumers, Ms. Dhungana suggested that a media education campaign should be conducted at all audience levels.

Ms. Rehana Hakim, deputy editor of Newsline in Pakistan, said that pluralism in Pakistan remains an ideal unless religious and ethnic intolerance which is abetted by the media is completely eradicated. She cited numerous examples of ethnic strife claiming
numerous lives which the government is unable to control in Pakistan. She said that the press in Pakistan is reflective of the existing prejudices in Pakistan society. She said that unless the media is able to promote a socially civil, open-minded and dynamic society, pluralism will remain a distant dream in Pakistan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After the presentations, the participants were divided into two working groups that called for action in the following areas of priority:

Action Plan for Strengthening the Role of Media in Promoting Pluralism in South Asia

1. Develop mechanisms for self-regulation and accountability among papers, media unions/associations to assure the highest ethical journalistic standards. This could be done by creating an independent authority or a board with representatives of social groups, NGO’s etc. to monitor all media.

2. Press or media councils should have a degree of autonomy in terms of composition and functions. Their watchdog functions should be strengthened and actively encouraged.

3. Media practitioners and institutions should set up/maintain mechanisms of feedback from networks of the widest range of interest groups (ethnic, women’s human rights, civic pressures, and other social and developmental (NGO’s) in order that the mass media remain committed to the plurality of interests in society.

4. The state control and monopoly of the electronic media should be reduced, and instead liberalisation and privatisation of the electronic media should be encouraged. Private electronic media must be able to provide multiplicity of views and programming choices, accepting however, moral and ethical standards.

5. Governments should be encouraged to grant subsidies or import duty free facilities to the private media, including equipment, machinery’s supplies (newsprint, films etc.) Where print/electronic media are dependent on state advertising support (or public enterprises) for their sustainability, such support should be fair and equitable.

6. In order to ensure freedom of expression and promote pluralism, the legislative powers in relation to breach of privilege, which today takes the shape of severe punitive measures, should be curbed.

7. Regional and or local media - small, rural community presses, local radio and TV stations, should be developed/strengthen, including the provision of soft loans for their establishment/sustenance and training facilities for the development of skills and capabilities.

8. Existing organisations which protect the rights of journalists should be strengthened and linked in networks.

9. A regional organisation such as SAMA be strengthened to enable journalists to work
in an atmosphere of mutual support, and greater mobility in the region.

10. An attempt should be made to promote media pluralism by twinning or establishing links between the different indigenous language media. One aspect of this could be the exchange of journalists among the different media within and across countries.

11. Minority groups in South Asia should be given a better representation in the mainstream media and they should also be reached through the alternative media.

12. The limited accessibility to the media of the majority of the people in South Asia should be overcome by special emphasis on the use of radio.

13. Gender balance in media including in management/decision and policy making levels should be maintained.

14. Research must be used as a planning tool for establishing, monitoring and evaluating the performance of media and media-related institutions.

15. Media education programmes at all audience levels must be initiated to develop the critical ability of media consumers in view of the increasing choices offered by satellite communication. Social and civic groups and media organisations should be encouraged to conduct such media consumer education.

16. An award should be established as a commendation or recognition of media practitioners or institutions for notable achievements in strengthening pluralism.

17. Organisers of various international, regional and local meetings relevant to media and pluralism should encourage follow up activities.

Evaluation

Overall, the participants rated the quality of the programme very highly. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest, 42 percent rate the overall quality of the programme wit a 5 and 50 percent rated it a 4. The participants likewise gave very high ratings to the presentations and discussions. The majority gave the sessions a rating of 4 and 5. The seminar was generally regarded as a success in meeting its objectives. The seminar generated some actionable recommendations and provided a forum for the discussion of a very important topic.

Conclusion

On the whole, the seminar achieved the objectives it set. In-depth discussions on very important issues of concern to the region and actionable recommendations were generated from the working group sessions. Follow-up activities were identified for action with the proper agencies.