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Promoting Pluralism Through Media
And Other Social Institutions

By

U L Shrestha
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And
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Introduction:

Pluralism represents great value of recognizing individuality of human beings and the characteristic traits of their communities or societies. It seeks to provide maximum importance to units of whole. Oriental thinkers deemed the attempt as manifestation of one single branch in trillion faceted universe. The occidental philosophers also voiced for individual liberty, societal upliftment while advocating the advancement of nations. "Unless the constituent of a society is conscious or developed the latter cannot flourish," opine the scholars denouncing the authoritarian formula of singularism in politics, economy, literature, art and several other sectors. Medicos witness pluralism in the nature and function of sense organs in human body.

Although a very ancient concept or what some intellectuals say "plaything of freedom minded leaders of societies," pluralism began being reiterated quite often in recent times. The frequent re-use of pluralism accompanied the commencement of the fall of "Soviet Empire" with change in Eastern Europe. The single authority with its single command failed to address the need of the society which is basically plural. It resulted in the demise of the Soviet-practised communism and amply pointed out the importance of pluralistic approach.

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Preaching pluralism is easy but practising it with sincerity appears difficult and requires high sense of understanding, appreciation, self-sacrifice, perseverance
and patience. Promoting pluralism, therefore, is a great challenge. The concept cannot spread automatically. Neither can it impress people easily. A serious attempt to popularise it and display its virtues as against the vice of authoritarianism is the need of the hour. The best instrument for promoting the cause of pluralism is the "Media" – the print and the electronic including both visual and broadcast. Social Institutions could also be handy in the process. The two, together, could present a wonderful blend mechanism to champion the cause of pluralism.

Role of Media

Media operate at the grass root level. They could feel the pulse of basic units or components of society. Since the function of the media is to communicate the message from one to another, media would contribute to pluralism if they concentrated on highlighting myriad units of society. Analysing, describing, bringing into front the hitherto unknown features, narrating lives and living-ways of communities, the media could play educative role besides arouses interest of readers, viewers or listeners on them. Although a matrix could not be worked out for specific coverage, some guidelines might be developed for the purpose. Because societies, communities, villages and human beings have so much diversity, the media should adjust their style and tune to the time and need of particular community.

Exploring the basic units of the society, researching the talent of individuals and discovering the unifying elements and points of agreement among societies should constitute the target. Media should point out the conflicting interests or points among individuals,
societies and communities and seek to make all concerned appreciative of the differing elements. Some pen men term the media role as bridge work in a pluralistic society. In some developed countries newspapers, radio and televisions have directed themselves to make people understand the importance of living together holding different opinions.

One cardinal principle the media should follow in popularising pluralism is: keep away from any vested interest group belong to all and be favourite to none. In different coverage nourished by facts, truth, events, pictures and reality alone can give the best message.

Social Institutions (Motivating Force):

Social institutions could also be helpful in spreading the value of pluralism. Their catalytic role in this respect has brought out wonderful results in some countries. The social workers or non-government volunteers could personally approach people or communities to convey the message of others. The personal approach is considered more influential in rendering people the lesson of pluralism. Volunteers, it is said, can open the "third eye" of people by informing them about the way their brethren live and think in other parts of the society.

A model for the functioning of social institutions cannot easily be formulated. However, volunteers should be first trained in communicating, approaching and impressing people about the plural societies. The message should be rendered simple, clear and direct. The character of the volunteers and their turn out should correspond with what they are going to preach. Communities should be specified for operation of volunteers.
Scenario of Nepal:

Nepal, like many South Asian countries, is a plural society of 18.4 million people living in 147,181 square kilometer area with plains, hills and snow capped mountains. Ethnic groups of the country are: Maithili, Bhojpuri, Sherpa, Tharu, Tamang, Newar, Rai, Aavadhi, Rajbanshi, Gurung, Magar, Limbu, Sunwar, Chhetris and Brahmins. A 15 hour a day Radio service, four and a half hour Television, over 100 daily newspapers and more than 473 weeklies and fortnight papers have to cater to the communication need of the people. Over hundred social volunteers' associations are also functional in different parts of the country. Their job is coordinated by Social Service National Council.

Nepal in ancient time believed in pluralism and practised the concept. Rana rule, an authoritarian regime, disallowed it for 104 years until 1951. Pluralism budded during the next decade culminating in formation of parliamentary government around May 1959. However, it could not flourish because the elected government was dissolved and political parties were banned nipping the prospects of pluralism. For 30 years thereafter pluralism could not be advocated because of the partyless nature of politics pursued in the country. People's Movement known as the Popular Movement of 1990 ended the Panchayat era and pushed the country into multiparty democratic system. The country had a new constitution on November 9, 1990. It guaranteed freedom and human rights to the people paving way for practice of pluralism.

Today the country has an opportune moment to serve the cause of pluralism. The media and social
institutions should rise to the occasion and serve the country accordingly. The new communication policy announced by the elected government guaranteed the people's right to know and make ways to fulfill the right.

The right to know is key to the development of pluralistic society and a democracy. Nepal by guaranteeing the right has created an atmosphere congenial to pluralism.

It was also a time when unprecedented progress had been attained in the field of media both in the private and public sectors and the situation had reached a stage when media - scope had assumed a very comprehensive national and international dimension. The communications network both in the print and audio-visual sectors had become so broad-based that any incident occurring anywhere in the world could become a matter of intimate gossip in the lanes and bylanes not only of Kathmandu but also of inaccessibly remote areas of the kingdom. The changes in the socio-political psychology of the Nepalese began to be influenced by how the pluralistic wave had been sweeping different parts of the world. The role of media both on national and international level in fact proved so effectively catalytical that the 30-year-old partyless system collapsed in a peoples movement.

But the role of the media has yet to be still more vital because the democracy which has now come is still pagite and it has got to be institutionally consolidated, an objective which cannot be achieved as long as awareness
among the general mass of the people is generated in this regard. It is the media that can play this role of spreading the message of democracy to the people.

It is a matter of worth-noting here that the transition from a phase of totalitarian partyless system to the present constitutional monarchial multiparty political order could become so smooth only because of the role played by the media in generating the necessary democratic consciousness among the people despite the desperate counter-revolutionary conspiracies forged by forces that wanted to upset the entire achievement resulting from the people's verdict delivered through the popular movement of 1990.

If we analyse how hindrances were created in the process of formulated a new constitution reflecting the spirit and objectives spelled in the verdict of the movement for the restoration of the multiparty system it will be clear that it was the role of the media which contributed meaningfully in getting the constitution drafted in a manner expected by the truly democratic forces.

While dwelling upon these sensitive points relating to the democratic resurrection, we cannot afford to forget how the media received help from the then interim government in fulfilling their due role in a befitting manner. It was as such with that cooperation between the government and the media that the public opinion too could be moulded in a manner which could contribute really
constructively in returning the Nepali Congress to power and the communists to assume the role of the main and major opposition in the parliament. It was really a very unique phenomenon, because nowhere in the world except in China and North Korea the communists could receive such a colossal support from the masses as they did in Nepal. It was also the result of the role played by the media that such a situation could arise.

However, the constitutional provisions and the new press and publications act have made ample arrangements for enabling the media in playing its role correctly and effectively. Under the present constitution every one has the right and access to information and the new press act also makes it clear that registration of newspapers will be cancelled or no newspaper can be punished for publishing any report or comments. These legal provisions have now provided a great deal of unrestricted freedom to the media and under such circumstances now there is no reason why cannot the media play its constructive role in promoting the cause of pluralism because it is this basic ideal which underlines the directive principles of our multiparty democracy which reflects the psyche of the present age.

Conclusion:

Pluralism is thus innate virtue of individuals and societies. It should be promoted
by appropriate mechanism in an atmosphere marked by cordiality, understanding and sympathy. Media and social institutions should bear the onus of popularising it.

Today is the era of pluralism, not of singularism, not of authoritarianism. Media people should aggressively come forward to transmit the message of pluralism throughout the nook and corner of the world. They should brave hazardous journey ahead. Social institutions are there to back their efforts.

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