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Media As Avenues For Conflict Resolution
In Pluralistic Societies

By

P Kharel
Media as Avenues for Conflict Resolution in Pluralistic Societies

—P. Kharel
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The Rising Nepal

In principle, media can be very useful avenues in the resolution of conflicts by building, moulding and tempering public opinions. Intrinsically, pluralistic societies have the potential to disturb the strands of fabric they are composed of. The specific reasons for a conflict may vary from country to country. But a generalization may be that it surfaces due to the lack of an atmosphere where a public is not groomed to make an informed choice in the participation of a debate on the contentious issue in question. Helping the public to make up its mind by acquainting it with a diversity of views is precisely what media is supposed to work for. But, capable of doing this is only one kind of media, that is credible media.

Credibility

Media credibility is more often reiterated than practised toward in much of the world. Despite recognizing that the principle of objectivity is a cardinal basis for dissemination of news and views, the fact in our context remains that a highly partisan press exists with all that it implies for lack of credibility. In South Asia, the control of government over press and electronic media has remained generally an enduring feature, whatever the system of the
government. The change of government does not necessarily mean any dent on the status quo of the electronic media and the news agencies. The degree and the scope of the control may vary, but the common denominator is that the freedom of the press in its true sense is still many hurdles away.

For the governments, granting autonomy to the electronic media is simply unthinkable, whatever the public postures on the question. The all-too-ready plea is that the public is not yet ready for it. The simple reason is that the government is just not too keen on loosening its control and the tool is just too dear to part with. And controlling the flow of information becomes easy with the news agencies surviving mostly on government grants. The press in most cases have no alternative but to depend on the stories carried by the national news agencies with a dubious sense of objectivity, as collecting news on their own is beyond their means and resources.

Very interestingly, the familiar posture of politicians regarding the autonomy of electronic media presents a study in political expediency. When in opposition, the politicians, with a seemingly high degree of self-righteousness, invariably call for media autonomy and privatization. But once the same lot comes to power, they choose to be blissfully oblivious to their earlier stand.

Nepal is no exception to the general propensity of government to nurture subservient media. The two dailies, with the highest circulation figures in the land, in Nepali and English, are run by a government-controlled corporation. While they may be the largest dailies, mostly on the strength of direct and indirect government support, questions may arise as to their credibility. Radio Nepal is sustained by government grants. The same is true of Nepal Television, a recent entrant into the Nepalese media world. Rastriya Samachar Samiti (RSS), the National News Agency, enjoys a monopoly and survives virtually on subscription...
from the above government-controlled media. As all the major media outlets are in the hands of the government, the media credibility is to a large extent a much-sought-after commodity.

Logically, it would seem that the Nepalese private press would come to the rescue. But that expectation is generally belied. It too suffers from low credibility. Lying at the bottom of this problem is the lack of resources. Which is why the press in the private sector perforce becomes dependent on the support of one group or the other. The scenario, therefore, is such that most leading newspapers or periodicals toe a partisan line—left, right, pro-this, pro-that etc. A large section of the private press fawns on the government while an equally large segment bashes its policies every way it can. For the government, the helping hand from the bunch of the official media is always assured.

Elsewhere too, there are newspapers who support a certain party—but on an issue-based approach. A government does enjoy backing from its supporters in the media. But it is not spared by the same supporters for its acts of omission and commission, and is suitably pulled up when the occasion demands. Unfortunately, in Nepal—and perhaps elsewhere too in South Asia—the props enjoyed by the government or the opposition by their adherent media outlets are in most cases automatic and total, with no patience for contrary views. With no provision for private radio or TV, the news agency dependent on dole-outs, and the private press faring poorly, the readers, listeners and viewers often rely on foreign media for even the domestic news.

Partisan Press

The controversy over the Tanakpur barrage in west Nepal provides a recent example of the partisan press at full play. The controversy erupted after an
accord was signed between Nepal and India last December on the barrage in question which partly stands on the Nepalese side of the border. Sharing of waters and electricity thereof were the attendant issues. The official media would predictably concur with the government view on the issue, with its supporters in the private press too defending its version. The Opposition press have described the accord a sell-out and considered a two-third majority in the parliament necessary for the ratification of what it calls a treaty. The government has hotly denied the Opposition contention and does not consider it a treaty, thus, not requiring the said majority for its passage in the parliament. Accusations and counter-accusations flying in the parliament between the treasury and the Opposition benches found a faithful reflection in the respective segments of the press. The media division was clear. The matter came to such a pass that the Supreme Court is to rule on November 3 whether it is a simple agreement or a treaty.

With the nationalism itself being debated, a certain amount of consensus would have been expected. But that was not to be. Whether the private press, not to speak of the official media, was serious in the task of shaping an unbiased public view on the matter is open to question. The general readers would have been forgiven for wondering how much of the print was dictated by narrow, partisan considerations and how much by a sense of objectivity and the larger national interests. The end result was that the mass of neutral readers was a confused lot.

The Tanakpur topic is a representative sample of the media muddle in Nepal. The muddle becomes murkier in direct proportion to the gravity of the issue. An editorial respect for plurality of views is sadly hard to find. A common reader has to read several papers to make a fair guessestimate of the pros and cons of
the issue of the day. Whether he becomes enlightened or further befuddled is a moot point, however.

Such inevitable mystification of the issue by a partisan press poses more dangers when more and more sensitive issues come to the fore as, indeed, they are coming after Nepal entered political pluralism. Questions about minority interests are surfacing. Innocent and legitimate they may be, such questions are susceptible to playing into the hands of the unscrupulous groups, parties or individuals for parochial gains. When the press joins the fray on behalf of those groups, the threat of passion flare-ups becomes very real and dangerous.

New Era

With the return of multi-party democracy after more than 30 years and the subsequent holding of the first general elections last year, political pluralism is the new culture to live by. This culture has to be consolidated and nurtured. Hopes have risen in all aspects of public life, including the media world. Past experiences in the democracies in this part of the world should, however, be a caveat that not everything automatically and speedily changes satisfactorily when the political systems change.

The new popularly-mandated government in Nepal has made some encouraging promises for guaranteeing the right to information as enshrined in the constitution promulgated in November 1990 after the restoration of democracy in April earlier that year. The new Press Policy, recently adopted, has promised to take the press as an industry. Loans may be comparatively easily obtained to run a paper now. Likewise, private programmes may be encouraged on the electronic media. In fact, TV and radio are recommended to allot airtime to private companies too. The policy, formulated by a high-level Task Force, also
reiterates the earlier stance of the government that the official media may be gradually privatized. The advertisement policy of the past which heavily favoured government-owned media is also promised to undergo change.

Importantly, the new laws guarantee that no paper is banned. The registration of the papers has been made easier. In the past, the local administration could confiscate the issue on some pretext or ban the paper if it stepped on the government's toes. Potential publishers and editors, therefore, used to be wary to venture into the field. Jail terms for the offending publishers and editors were not uncommon. These things are now promised to be made a feature of the past, never to be practised.

The promises are aplenty. Only time will tell how the buzzword of privatization sees real implementation. Such promises do not easily get translated into reality in South Asia. Let us hope they are not broken in Nepal's case. The prevarication that has marked the question of giving autonomy to the electronic media has been very conspicuous around here. Under the circumstances, private companies being allowed to take to the airwaves on a big scale appears to be only a remote possibility in the near future. Admittedly, it is an insult to the intelligence of the Nepalese, and, for that matter, the South Asians, when private parties are deemed unsuitable to handle the electronic media. And that only the Big Brother—the Government—knows the best.

**Difficulties**

Media practitioners do face difficulties and challenges in a country where the media reach is limited. With 60 per cent illiteracy, the print media's reach is greatly restricted. Curtailing the accessibility of the printed word are other twin hitches, that of transportation and the lack of purchasing power in the
poverty-ridden country. The lack of road and other means of transports in the largely-mountainous country has meant that that the national dailies reach only a few places outside the Kathmandu Valley on the same day. The reach of the electronic media has its own limitations. Poverty again comes into play on the issue of ownership prevalence. Besides, the medium wave range of Radio Nepal is very limited while the television beams are even more restricted.

Another major difficulty that a potential media manager would face is the question of availability of advertisements. Being overwhelmingly an agrarian country—90 per cent of the Kingdom's 19 million people derive their livelihood from the land—advertisements are few and far between, too little to draw enough for sustenance. As there is hardly a booming trade and commerce, and a very modest service sector, Nepalese mediapersons soon find that it is hard to come by sources of advertisements.

All these problems, however, should not be related to the fundamental question of trusting the private sector to develop and foster the electronic media and, indeed, the present official print media. The private sector must be taken into confidence. A serious phase-wise blue-print on transfer of these media from the government control to the private sector should be drawn up and the same gradually implemented. Despite the constraints, there is absolutely no reason why the private hands cannot be better managers of the electronic media, given the opportunity and encouragement. The imperatives for such a move are obvious, as the major question of credibility and the right to correct information takes on more significance than ever in the new democratic set-up.

This question applies to the news agency, the RSS, as well. With its network extremely poor, the news agency is basically focussed on the capital city and concentrates on protocol news. In-depth stories are rare and balanced treatment
of the issues even rarer. It tends to support and carry viewpoints of the
government of the day. It is simply too ill-equipped to carry the onus of being a
credible source of news for its subscribers. Out of this realization perhaps, the
government has ended its monopoly. But so far no private agency has come up
obviously because of the lack of paying subscribers. For, even RSS can not last a
week without subscriptions from the official media and government grants.

Minority Interests

The new political pluralism has also vividly brought to the fore the pluralistic society that Nepal is. The mosaic of different communities has come into sharp relief, as issues of minority interests begin to surface in the new open society. Media, naturally, have to become avenues for airing the diverse views newly given voice. So far, however, mass media do not seem to have attracted the different linguistic groups as platforms for making their presence felt.

A survey by a group of trainees taking journalism classes at the Nepal Press Institute revealed that the number of newspapers, magazines and other periodicals stands at a whopping 1150 in a nation of 19 million people with a literacy rate of only 40 per cent. However, hardly a dozen papers appear in languages other than the national language Nepali, and English, whereas Nepal boasts of more than a dozen major languages and many more dialects.

Needless to say, these languages need to be fostered for all the values they represent in the preservation of a particular community's cultural and ethnic identity. The low literacy rate may inhibit the print media to act as the instruments for the linguistic and cultural development, but the radio and
television could come forward. Doing this job from the national centres of broadcasting and telecasting with the far-flung audience as the target may be difficult. Therefore, regional centres of electronic media may be the right tools to promote rural all-round development through programmes tailored to the local tastes and needs.

The importance of the media in bringing the local communities to the mainstream of development by ending their alienation, if any, is obvious. Equally obvious is their significance in promoting a balanced picture on the issues affecting them and their relevance in the larger national context, and in fostering tolerance and respect for other communities. A correct attitude and proper perspectives thus cultivated would stand the communities in good stead when in the new culture of political pluralism they may have to face demagogues out to fish in troubled waters of communal conflict.

Under the past political system, the press was stifled with various restrictive rules making even a registration of a newspaper difficult. Ironically, a positive side of all this was that there was little incitement of communal passions through newspapers. Now that political pluralism has been ushered in, there is a distinct fear of the same. In Nepal, no big ethnic issues, like elsewhere in South Asia, have flared. However, communal sentiments have surfaced in some news and views carried by some of the papers. This trend could only grow. Even deliberate fanning of communal passions by a few stray newspapers could, however, be nullified if there are a fair number of truly credible media. In the absence of the same, disruptive forces, from the comfort afforded by an open society, could play havoc with the social tenor.
Mult-Party democracy has arrived. So should a credible media. It is a truism that political pluralism must be reflected in the media too. The new-found freedom has brought with it some inherent risks which can be tackled effectively with a media that plays with credibility its role of extensively and impartially informing the public on the various issues. The opportunity offered by the new democratic set-up should be used to foster precisely such channels of media and create the right culture for the same. The primacy of a free, credible press in a democracy is undoubted. A free, independent and pluralistic media helps build and reflect public opinion effectively, so necessary to build consensus in a functioning democracy.

In all fairness, it is too early to evaluate the government on how seriously it has moved to grapple with the crisis of credibility in the Nepalese media, but if time is wasted and the cardinal principle that democracy and a credible Fourth Estate should go together is lost sight of, there may be threats to the hard-earned democracy itself.

Political pluralism, in effect, is an opportunity for the pursuit of stability in a free atmosphere. But in the absence of a culture of credible media, there is a constant threat to even what stability is already there. In this void, democracy cannot flower, let alone be consolidated.

Nepalese media need a second news agency. It is a must as one of the primary measures for the growth of credibility. No less important is that private companies be allowed to run TV and radio. The government will have demonstrated its commitment to the promotion of a truly credible media, if it
sets afoot moves to privatize the print media too under its grip. Patently, it
cannot be credited as a shining attribute of a democratically-elected government
that it continues to perpetuate an anachronistic practice left over by a bygone
era.

It is only a year and a half since the present government was elected. Coming to power in the wake of a popular movement for change, it is naturally expected to perform up to the heightened aspirations of the people. The problems are numerous—the one related to media is only one of them. For the Nepalese mediapersons and, indeed, the general masses, the promises made have fuelled their expectations even further—that there just might be the light of a credible media at the end of the tunnel. Here, tied to the earnest efforts or otherwise at promoting media credibility is the government's credibility itself. Undoubtedly, the government credibility and the fate of media will depend on how promptly and effectively the new policies are implemented.