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Report

By

Victor T Valbuena
INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the proceedings of the CONSULTATION ON PRESS SYSTEMS IN SAARC held in Kathmandu, Nepal on 2-5 April. The Consultation was organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) and the Nepal Press Institute (NPI), with funding support from The Asia Foundation (TAF). Venue of the Consultation was the Hotel Himalaya, Kathmandu.

The purpose of the consultative meeting was to abstract the principal philosophical and legal tenets of the press systems of SAARC states to generate a comprehensible doctrine of press systems in SAARC societies. The meeting was also intended to provide a forum for exchange of views among media professionals, academics, and government officials in SAARC countries on the role and responsibility of the press in the region, and the limits of press freedom and government control.

Twenty-three participants from the seven member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) attended the Consultation. They included ministry secretaries of communication/information, editors/senior journalists, and media researchers/academics. The list of participants is found in Appendix A.

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

2 April 1991

OPENING CEREMONIES. Mr. Gopal Das Shrestha, President of the Nepal Press Institute, welcomed the participants and guests on behalf of NPI. In his address, Mr. Shrestha said that the press is conditioned by the environment in which it operates. He noted that different levels of economic development and different cultural milieus of the SAARC states necessarily influence perceptions of press freedom and how the press should operate in a given country.

Mr. Vijay Menon, Secretary General of AMIC, also welcomed the participants and guests on behalf of the Centre. In his address, Mr. Menon reiterated the need to re-examine the role and responsibility of the press in Asia, vis-a-vis Asian contexts and not against the usual Western models and standards of the press.
Mr. Yog Prasad Upadhaya, Minister of Communication, H.M. Government of Nepal, was the Chief Guest at the opening. In his inaugural address he emphasized that a free press is essential for democracy, that it is synonymous with democracy.

Mr. K.K. Bhargava, Secretary General of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, also delivered an address. He observed that media reporting on matters affecting regional cooperation was inadequate; he appealed for the media in South Asia to bring to the masses the issues and contents of regional cooperation.

Representatives from the diplomatic corps, the Nepal Government, and the media were present at the opening ceremonies.

A copy of the consultation's programme is found in Appendix B. Full texts of addresses during the opening ceremonies are found in Appendix C.

COUNTRY REPORTS. After the opening, the rest of the day was devoted to paper presentations on the press systems in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Maldives.

Dr. Tawhidul Anwar, Associate Professor of Journalism, Dhaka University, discussed the influence of the three great religions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam on the philosophical orientation of the press in Bangladesh; the restrictions on the press during martial rule; and the liberation of the Bangladesh press with the lifting of all the "black laws" imposed during the regime of now deposed President Ershad.

Mr. Kinley Dorji, Editor of KUENSEL, emphasized the development-orientation of the media in Bhutan. He stated that "Today, the Bhutanese media is already an integral part of the country's development and, with the growth in literacy and increased interaction with the rest of the world, we expect the press to play a vital role in the country's future."

Dr. J.S. Yadava, Director of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication recalled the role of the press in the freedom movement against Great Britain, explored the influence of Gandhian philosophy on the press, and explained the political orientation of the Indian press.

Mr. Mohammed Saleem, Senior Journalist of HAVEERU DAILY, cited the influence of Islam on the press in Maldives, the local laws and regulations affecting the press, and the manpower and environmental factors that effect the growth of the press in the islands.
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COUNTRY REPORTS. The morning was devoted to paper present­ations on the press systems in Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Mr. Shyam Bahadur K.C., Editor of THE RISING NEPAL, recalled the historical development of the press in Nepal, examined the influence of the "panchayat" system on the orientation of the press, reviewed the restrictions imposed on the press, and explored the implications of the new freedom of the press brought about by the people's movement of February-April 1990 which wrought a change in the system of government in Nepal.

Mr. Vijitha Yapa, Senior Journalist of THE TIMES, Colombo, presented a paper on the Sri Lankan Press prepared by Dr. Jehan Perera. The paper traced the historical development of the Sri Lankan press after independence from Britain, the nationalization of the press, the imposition of censorship and other restrictions, and the continued flourishing of non-mainstream views in spite of these restrictions.

Copies of these papers are found in Appendix D. (Please note that these copies are unedited, preliminary drafts and will be updated, revised and edited to form part of a publication to be titled THE PRESS SYSTEMS IN SAARC.)

GENERAL DISCUSSION. The afternoon was devoted to a general discussion of the topic "Philosophical and Legal Tenets of the Press in SAARC". Led by Discussion Chairman, Mr. Nikhil Chakravarty, Editor of MAINSTREAM, the participants explored in more detail some of religio-philosophical tenets that helped to shape the character of the individual press systems in the region; e.g., Hinduism in India and Nepal, Islam in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Maldives, and Buddhism in Bhutan and Sri Lanka. The participants also cited specific instances where adherence to religious tenets, including religious fanaticism, have influenced press coverage and reportage of socio-political issues and events; e.g., the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India, the "Salman Rushdie affair" as covered in Bangladesh and Pakistan, the Tamil uprising in Sri Lanka, and the Buddhist religious ban against animal slaughter vis-a-vis the dog overpopulation in Bhutan, etc.

The discussion also focused on specific applications of libel and defamation laws, government newsprint quotas, censor­ship and sealing restrictions, among others, in the various countries. It was noted that in Bhutan, there are still no press laws and regulations, and that in the Maldives they have yet to formulate libel laws.
4 April 1991

GENERAL DISCUSSIONS. The morning was devoted to further discussion of two topics: "The Role and Responsibility of the Press in SAARC", and "The Limits of Free Expression and Government Control".

On the first topic, the participants explored several roles of the press, e.g. to inform the public, to educate them on social and political issues, to persuade them to take action, and to motivate them to participate in a country's development processes. The participants also discussed the potential role of the press in fostering more regional cooperation and harmony in the SAARC region. Chairman of the discussion was Mr. A.Z.M. Nasiruddin, Secretary, Ministry of Information, Government of Bangladesh.

On the second topic, the participants reviewed the traditional adversarial relationship of the media and government as articulated in the West and the need to re-examine this relationship in the context of the stages of economic development of developing countries; discussed the need for certain forms of control in the press, whether instituted from within the press itself or instituted by government; and affirmed the ideal of balancing freedom and responsibility in press coverage. Mr. Vijitha Yapa of THE TIMES, Colombo acted as Discussion Chairman.

SMALL GROUP WORKSHOPS. In the afternoon, the participants broke up into small groups to synthesize the three general discussions into recommendations.

5 April 1991

PRESENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS. The Chairman of each of the discussion groups presented their synthesis of the discussions and their specific recommendations, which are as follows:

I. "Philosophical and Legal Tenets of the Press Systems in SAARC Countries"

The philosophical tenets of the press systems in SAARC countries are derived from:

- The recognition of the diversity in the cultures and religious beliefs of the countries in the region;

- The understanding of the impact of religious, social and cultural values existing in the region;
- The need to comprehend the popular perceptions and to articulate them;
- The need for the promotion of social values and pragmatism within society;
- The need to contribute towards national integration and elimination of tensions;
- The urge for the betterment of the quality of life of the individual in SAARC countries while discarding negative impulses undermining the social and cultural fabric; and
- The influence of tradition and heritage in the development of society.

Based on these philosophical tenets, legal tenets are given expression through:

- Assertion of the fundamental right of the freedom of thought and expression in the constitutions;
- Further evolution of codes of conduct consistent with individual faith and beliefs while reinforcing human rights.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the information pertaining to fundamental human rights and obligations be widely disseminated to the peoples in the SAARC countries by the press. This in turn will make the people aware of their rights and obligations to society and help them to attain a better quality of life.

II. "Role and Responsibility of the Press in SAARC Countries"

The primary functions of the SAARC press are:

a. To assist in nation-building and human resource development;

b. To recognize objectivity in news reporting, irrespective of the nature of publication;
c. To recognize that our societies are multi-lingual and multi-ethnic and strive to eschew ethnic and linguistic differences;

d. To demonstrate social commitment through in-depth and investigative articles on social problems, with special emphasis on women, children, the minorities and the poor;

e. To inform and educate not just the urban population but also the rural population;

f. To augment regional coverage;

g. To involve the people in decision-making by bringing information of vital importance to them;

h. To recognize that there is no single model to follow but the freedom of the press is paramount;

i. To promote friendly relations and South Asian regional cooperation; and

j. To exchange and coordinate with publications, to publish articles about SAARC countries and concentrate initially on well written features with good illustrations.

III. "The Limits of Free Expression and Government Control"

- Press freedom should be exercised through self-regulation and not through government control.

- Press freedom should not be allowed to degenerate into license.

- The national press should endeavour to develop a SAARC perspective and look at problems and issues in that context.

- Journalists should endeavour to evolve a voluntary code of ethics.

- The governments of SAARC countries should provide resources for training of journalists.

- The governments should not use extraneous factors such as the distribution of advertisements and newsprint quota as an instrument to undermine the
freedom of the press.

- The emoluments and service conditions of journalists should be such that they can function without fear or favour.

The participants also passed a resolution addressed to the SAARC Secretariat, which reads:

The Consultation on Press Systems in SAARC Countries held at Kathmandu (April 2-5, 1991), attended by delegations from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, has unanimously made the following recommendations for early consideration and implementation by the SAARC Secretariat:

1. To facilitate free and prompt movement of information, the accredited journalists of SAARC countries should be exempted from visa restrictions while travelling in the countries of the region.

2. To ensure free and adequate flow of information, there should be a special concessional tariff for communication within SAARC countries.

3. To promote and encourage mutual interaction and interface, the SAARC Secretariat should assist professional bodies to hold regional seminars, colloquia, conferences and training programmes for media practitioners in the SAARC countries.

4. The SAARC Secretariat should set up a Media Research and Documentation Centre for facilitating the development and expansion of media activity in the SAARC region.

Following these presentations, the members of the media present raised some questions and sought clarification from the participants. Some of the issues raised were on press freedom and human rights in the SAARC countries.

CLOSING. Mr. K.P. Rijal, Acting Secretary, Ministry of Communication, H.M. Government of Nepal, delivered the address at the closing session of the consultation.

Mr. Rijal said that the major challenge of the press in South Asia is how to make the press system relevant and meaningful to the vast populace in the rural areas. "Equally important", he said, "is how to create an attitude of looking at things positively. Granted, the press has a role of watchdog and it is supposed to report misdoing, abuse of authority and things like
that. But such reports should, in no way, overshadow or overlook the development efforts and kill the inspirations, aspiration and enthusiasm to the extent of frustration and passivity."

The text of Mr. Rijal's speech is found in Appendix E.

FOLLOW-UP ACTION

The resolution addressed to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation was handed over to the SAARC Secretary General, Mr. K.K. Bhargava. Mr. Bhargava committed to review the resolution and act on its recommendations.

The Consultation on Press Systems in SAARC reprises a similar consultative meeting for the ASEAN countries held in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1988. The Jakarta meeting resulted in the publication of a book called PRESS SYSTEMS IN THE ASEAN STATES; it includes the country papers presented at the consultation as well as authoritative papers and policy speeches by the leaders of the ASEAN states.

The Kathmandu consultation aims to duplicate this book project. At present, the country papers presented in Kathmandu are being updated, expanded, and revised by their authors to ensure that substantial quality papers are included in a proposed companion volume, PRESS SYSTEMS IN THE SAARC STATES. Also, policy speeches, articles and similar writings on the press in the different South Asian countries are being sourced to provide the government perspective to the subject. The proposed publication should be out by early 1992.

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