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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
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Relevance Of Nepali Mass Media In Rural Areas:
A Case Of A Tribal Village Of Chepang In The Central Hills Of Nepal

By

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Relevance of Nepali Mass Media in Rural Areas: A Case of a Tribal Village of Chepang in the Central Hills of Nepal.

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A paper presented to the Workshop on Media Education in South Asia, Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre 3-7 August, 1992 New Delhi.
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Preface

Once, a great saint was preaching to a mass of his devotees under a bunyan tree. Everybody was spell bound. As the holy man progressed on, he saw one person at a corner of the crowd crying looking towards him. The saint was inspired further and spoke further with excitement and satisfaction.

When the saint finished, he asked one of his disciples to bring the guy as he wanted to speak to him. The saint gently asked "Bhakta, Oh my lord’s devotee, what in my preaching touched you most and made you cry?". The poor chap little hesitated but supported by the saint’s disciples to speak said: "Baba, respected holy saint, last night my goat, beards of which resembled to yours died. When I saw you it reminded me of the goat. Lord, a misfortune fell on me."

Introduction:

Mass media and its role significantly differs in a developing country such as Nepal and the developed world. Its impact is not be seen as prominently as in the developed society. Obviously, it is much less profound in rural areas than in the urban areas within developing countries - the foremost obstacle being the accessibility of the people over the media. To put in another way, the media itself in general has not been able to make itself appropriate for the majority of population for these people do not account as their interest groups. The media considered to be one of the five components of the democratic society (as the fifth column) itself is unfortunately undemocratic.

This paper illustrates a case of one of the economically most disadvantaged tribes in Nepal - the Chepang - based on the author’s a few months stay in the area. Major forms of Nepalese mass media have been analysed from non-technical
point of view (i.e. non media person) in the above context. Problems of mass media in getting to the people discussed and points and ways of compromising are explored in the given situation.

The Area and the People

The small village of Wasbang and its satellite hamlets in periphery - not worthy of covering for any mass media until a big part of the village is washed away by the monsoon rains or an epidemic sweeps it (it would have certainly on the media if the ill-fated THAI had crashed in the village) - is situated in the southern boundary of Chitwan district, in the Mahabharat hills of central Nepal. The village forming the watersheds of Kandrang and Mairang Khola, is situated at an altitude of about 1,000m and is surrounded by the road from all sides.

The village is inhabited by a mongoloid tribe of Chepang with a couple of houses belonging to occupational Hindu castes. (Presently they are called Praja - the kings subjects - called by the present king's father to give them a feeling of Nepalese nationality.) They used to live as hunter-gatherers until recently. They are facing a serious problem as the forests on which they depended are dwindling and no longer can support them. They are in a struggle to replace their dependency from forests to agriculture fields.

The Prajas altogether accounting 30,000 approximately in the country are on the verge of loosing their cultural identity. They live in marginal lands practicing slash and burn. Due to severe poverty combined together with illiteracy, they are disorganised, powerless and look on to somebody if they
could help them. One can find many women who have two living children mostly prone to malnutrition and subsequent diseases - out of 10 she gave birth. Due to the lack of experience in combining animal husbandry with agriculture, land is unproductive and hardly can meet two ends of their product to feed themselves. To survive, they find a work in construction work in nearby development works, work for other tribes and castes as shepherds or houseboys and few were reported working even as bonded labour. They must sell their nutritional products such as goats and chicken, beans, honey and oil (significantly from a plant called Chiuri (Brassia Butyraceae), for salt, clothing to cover socially unexposable organs. A new cloth is hardly washed before it vanishes though it is worn ragged for a long time. An even surfaced wooden plank is their bed and a straw mat is for the guests in better-off houses. On the other hand, a couple of people have transistor sets and owning a watch for a young boy can be a bait for a girl he likes. Enrolment is high in the school at the time when government distributes school uniform at the beginning of the academic calendar. Out of a population of about 200 people, two persons were found to have passed grade 5.

Access to Media:

This tribe alone does not represent all the rural areas of Nepal but it is a slight exaggeration of the majority of Nepalis. To this end, the question is how accessible is the media is to the Nepalis and impact is assessed. Further, there is no statistics available so that the pattern is analysed. This will have to be qualitatively extrapolated based on the experience.
Apparently, access to the means of media is limited by two major factors: literacy and poverty. However, the ownership of the means of media is not correlated to literacy and poverty in the cases such as the ownership of radio receivers. They are further limited by the coverage of media itself as the case of television – which is less impaired by the literacy but by the poverty cover a small part of Nepal. Newspaper have further limited scope due to transportation difficulties, illiteracy and poverty. All forms of the media are further limited by their objectivity and effectiveness of the each individual media themselves.

Content of the Media

From the author’s layman point of view as their audience, Nepalese mass media is broadly categorised as follows based on their objectivity guided by their dominant subject matter:

Government Media

Radio
Television

Newspapers:
The Gorkhapatra
The Rising Nepal

Private Media

Newspapers
Movies

Institutional

Wallnewspapers

Since, the outlined area has coverage of the radio, now onwards for the sake of this paper, the media shall mean the radio only.
The Generalisation:
Not in Nepal alone, throughout the world, media issues are falsely represented by minority at the cost of majority in the following manner:

a) they are forced to the cultural values of the minority: In the big Chepang festival of Chhonam (a festival of starting new grain probably similar to American Thanks Giving for Westerners to understand), almost definitely will be broadcasting one of the gospels of Puranas, Ramayan or Mahabharata. Many Praja have forgotten what it meant and why it is observed. Once, (actually when this author visited for the first time) asking if they observe Dashain - the biggest Hindu national festival of Nepal, one village adult felt insulted. "Hey, what do you think of us?" He proudly said "We do celebrate it, Tihar .... don't we listen to the radio?".

Another instance: it is normal practice that the high caste Hindus clean with water after defecation. It has been seen that tribal people mostly wipe with a nearby twig, leaf or good shaped stone. The health ad over the radio asks to clean their hands after defecation but do not say that it is still wise to wipe it to prevent bacteria getting into your food as long as it is not piercing or scratching than washing it without soap.

It is not due to the radio ad but due to the influence of the influential minority. However, the radio could draw their attention more if they could hear what they used to practice was not all bad.
b) Another generalisation is that of socio-economic status. It is much broadly generalised. There is a saying: when one of the ruling monarch was exposed to public people petitioned that they had hard to meet the hands and mouths. Then the monarch asked to his escort "Did even they had no milk and rice to eat ?". The situation has not improved much better than that. Even this year, the State Minister for Finance once mentioned "Praja and Chepang" while presenting the annual budget. Even the media repeated it. It has been generalised such way that they are one of the poor tribes - how poor, why nobody is concerned with. When I mentioned this to Praja they did not take it seriously at all: they were overwhelmed for the name of their tribe was being broadcast over the radio and that they are going to get something from the government.

Just before this author left the area for this workshop, one of the author's friend in the village asked for the last packet of the rehydration solution nationally branded as Jeevan Jal to leave behind. As his house was one the way, he saw the poor baby being given the dry solution. Really annoyed, he was seriously warned not to do so. But he replied "Sir, why the radio, then does not asks not to give the dust solution if it is so bad ?". This author had no answer. This author worked later. It was not needed to the people well assimilated to Hindu society that jal is the saintly word for holy water and they would not think of it anybody to use without water.

Similarly, whatever the slogan in support for the protection forest may be, it is least relevant for these people to care as
they cannot live without shifting their cultivation and slashing and burning more forest patches;

they do not have adequate clothing for cold;

they need firewood even for lighting as they cannot afford to buy kerosene apart from cooking.

c) Tuning Habits:

How much simple or target orientated the message the media may carry it is not perceived by the recipient unless media has been able to make a breakthrough in establishing it as a source of the truth.

People are used to their traditional sources. Unless, they come through those sources, the rate of penetration is much low. However, effective orator one is the traditional source is more trustworthy. One young women who gave birth in the village (in the house this author stayed) was suffering from diarrhea. This author and his colleague tried a lot to convince that she should be made sure that she is not dehydrated. They taught how to make a rehydration solution (which they already knew in fact). One day, two days, three days passed. She was getting weaker and thinner. Finally, they invited a faith healer. He beat the drum for the whole night. Fortunately, in the morning the healer concluded that it was not the disease to heal with drums. Then afterwards, they started taking the home made rehydration solution.

Guided Media:

All the above facts suggested that there are pre-conditions for the mass media to get through to the people. These include:

Objectivity of the media
Targeted to specialised target groups
Choosing appropriate means of media
Agreement that current mass media establishment is undemocratic.

However, the people like Chepangs would further need guidance to the media. The guide should be equipped with the tools of identifying and selecting subject matter in relation to the above facts. It is especially important to straightened the misinformation and prevent the negative side effects of media influx. It is also crucial that they understand and are able to distinguish which is ad and which is information.

One mother asked the colleague of this author while she was feeding her baby dhindo the hard boiled maize flour, what 'Em Em Chyau Chyau (Yum Yum Chow Chow - one of instant noodles brand in Nepal) is like. He did explained how it is like. Also answered how much does it cost. In few days, her husband sold some oil of Brassia in the market in the nearest road-head and brought a packet of the noodles! This author is not qualified enough to tell how much did that family lost in terms of calorie via-a-vis its cost. Such events continue to happen.

The Media Guides:
Many communities do have traditional community information systems and information agents. In many communities there is a village informer employed by the villagers paid in terms of grain after each harvests. He normally happens to be from occupational castes and called 'Katuwal' the yeller. He (no knowledge of being she) yells from the audible points of the village often
called as 'Katwal Chautaro' - the yellers dais. The Chepang people did not seem to have such a system.

There are other professionals which are common to most rural communities and are great in transmitting the information in the way their recipient used to tune in. (In many cases the information is also fabricated so that it fulfills their interest.)

The Faith Healer: He is the most trusted agent of information delivery. Being his profession to visit houses he takes this information right into the household, i.e. he speaks at the time when everybody is at home. In parts of Nepal they have been trained to be the local contraception retailers. This is equally well done by other spiritual leaders and priests in one form or another. They are normally more open to new ideas (for having authority to say right and wrong) and comparatively educated.

Teachers: Teachers who traditionally used to happen to be teachers are one of the ideal sources of media interpreter. These are limited by the location of the school and are driven by the school routine. They also are not in much contact with adults. They also have been experienced to have a programmed mental framework which may not be easily altered. They are useful in shaping the issues of the future. Low pay and difficulty in maintaining themselves in the rural areas with less chances of betterment are the causes of their frustration. They are good, however, if they undertake a side social work such as being trained on community health - bring people to them and have opportunity to interpret the media issues.
The Community Workers: These are one of the ideal media guides. But they are not found in adequate numbers. They are more or less accustomed with the etiquettes of talking to the people and can help if they wanted. One disadvantage with these workers is that they normally do not happen to be locals. Community workers who provide health services play vital role in the application of the information received.

Political Leaders: They are undoubtedly the most popular (easily identified) people in the villages. They are good orators and have a good sense of understanding. Unfortunately, to speak the bitter truth, experience has taught that rare leaders are trusted by the people (what a terribly non-democratic statement!).

Smiths/Tailors/Cobblers: These are the people needed by all. Their houses are good spots for providing hard information. Since, they are not as reputed as other professionals their role is unfortunately limited at least at present. However, they are the good innovators of income generating schemes.

Events and Spots
Due to the hardship of life people are not prepared and have no time to listen to at any time. Different occasions and different spots have different rate of preparedness.

The Festivals: Festivals also bring most of the village people together at a time. Being a time of merry-making it is romantic and leaderless. It is suitable for limited type of information and need an external (or
externalised) input. It may be suitable for introducing new techniques and devices. No exhibits can be used if the majority is illiterate. It is less represented by elderly folks but has wider radial.

Ceremonies: They are similar to festivals but cover clustered and scattered geographical area as the neighbors and relatives of the host are represented from different parts.

Shepherding: Most of the village youth meet while going for attending cattle. This time offers plenty of time and exchange of information is intensive.

Water Sources: This is short but passes quick information. Upto present it is being considered the women's meeting spot. It is very appropriate place for providing women specialised issues. With the increased provisions for piped drinking water these spots are gradually being deserted.

Planting/Harvesting Days: These are more regular forms of gathering. Mostly these are last few days of their major working season and generally paid back in terms of reciprocal labour. Normally people have good moods as these become easier parts of their works as well as the happiness of plantation and harvests. Apparently, these are good for food and agriculture related issues.

Timing
Timing for the media is very crucial and mostly badly generalised according to the urban lifestyles. It is very complicated to calculate free time as it is often shaped by the biological clock and runs after the livelihood pattern.
such as planting season of a particular crop, harvesting time for wild fruits and animals. (though media have a great impact to change their day planning.) For instance, at this time of year, Chepang people go for hunting bats at night; as there is nothing to light they go to bed as soon as it is dark; before it is dawn women are busy grinding maize or millet. Now, it is time for people to go for collecting fodder and planting finger millet when the Radio Nepal broadcasts Krishakako Bihan (Farmer's Morning - radio agriculture extension programme). Time for Radio Nepal's religious programme only can find people at home if they are sick.

Conclusion:
Mass Media in general are represented by minority interest groups and media cannot achieve its goal in isolation from the prevailing socio-economic as well as geographical conditions. If the mass media is to get to the people such as Chepangs it has to be guided. There are different people, places and periods to make the mediation effective. The mass media must negotiate with these to bring the issues in the rural areas like that of Chepangs.