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Communication Environment And Journalism In Nepal

By

G D Shrestha
One of the peculiarities of our times is that communication environment has ceased to be only national. It has also become global in nature.

This has created a situation where our behavioural patterns, even media behaviour, are impacted and determined not only by their immediate surroundings but also by whatever happens to obtain in the rest of the world also.

For instance, the "Third Wave" of democracy - as it has been called by some thinkers - which is presently sweeping through the world is also conditioning communication environment even in such corners of the world as have till yesterday stuck to and glorified what can be characterised as their traditional values.

But despite the wave however powerful, it also remains true that traditions and customary attitudes to communication behaviour still wield considerable influence.

So what we have today as an environment for communication is a mixture of global influence and national realities. Of course, this mixture has been evident more or less in the past also because cultures of the world always happen to be in interaction with each other all the time. So, even before the world started becoming a "global village", to refer to a well-known expression, these tendencies have existed. But along with the breath-taking development that has taken place in communication technology in the recent years, they have vastly accelerated. That makes an important difference, because it has made the resultant contradictions acuter.

Having said that much on the situation which has come to stay as a result of an accentuated interaction or confrontation between tradition and change these days, I may also point out that journalism in its present form being originally a western product, its assimilation in our cultural milieu is more or less, still in a process of finding its feet in our traditions. There have been great thinkers and great leaders who moved men and their civilisation in our history. But if we are not to perceive and describe "Sanjaya" - for instance - as the first journalist for having reported the great battle of Kuruchhetra in Mahabharat by virtue of his having the divine gift to tele-perceive even distant happenings, then we must say that whatever took place by way of organised journalism in this part of the world began with the arrival of the Britishers in India only. Nepal having never been under the British and being also tucked away safely in the Himalayan fastness, started her journey in this area later as her own enterprise, but certainly influenced by what was taking place down south in the Indian plains. Thus, Nepal's history of journalism is comparatively recent. It was less than 80 years ago that the Government of Nepal started a weekly newspaper in order to inform the people of what was happening in
the world and what the Government was doing - as it was stated when this paper was launched then.

There has always been a controversy whether the history of journalism in Nepal should be dated from that time onwards, with those who differ maintaining that it was no more than a Government gazette which had been put out at that time. On the other hand, they insist that the history of Nepalese journalism began only in 1950 when the then Rana autocracy was overthrown and newspapers started appearing in private or independent sector.

Whatever may be the case, it is clear from all this that journalism started in Nepal in emulation of what was taking place in other countries. This means, it did not grow out of Nepalese culture itself, strictly speaking, but was the product of a sort of transplantation.

But like all transplantations, it has to assimilate with the given culture notwithstanding the acceptability it has received as an important measure for attainment of modernisation.

Having said this, it should be at once clear that the environment in which journalism functions in Nepal is one which has yet to evolve in order to make it a natural part of life.

As I have mentioned above already, the necessity of journalism as a modernising factor is recognised by all. This universal awareness, so to say, has of course resulted in constitutional provisions which guarantee right to information and press freedom without any dilution or abridgement. But notwithstanding this, on practical level, there continue to exist a number of environmental constraints which has made Nepalese journalism and its performance what it is. To a foreigner, these intricacies may not be discernible. But they exist and influence us nonetheless.

What are these peculiarities? I myself am not competent to dwell on this subject exhaustibly. But to begin with, one may say that one of the important differences between Nepalese cultural trait and that of the west is that ours is more holistic than individualistic whereas that of the west is just the opposite. In other words, social traditions, customs and values as handed down by tradition influence our perceptions more than the freedom with which a man born and brought up in a different social and historical background can dispense with these things. The executive function of thinking and the mental structure of man are, of course, determined by the structure of the society within which they develop. This perhaps applies to everybody. But that is precisely why men happen to be so different also, from one clime to another, from one man to another.

More specifically speaking, being of holistic nature, Nepalese are usually less communicative at the individual plane, and of course their emphases are also different. Transparency has therefore been an important problem, which continues to interfere with "right to be
informed" which is guaranteed by the country's constitution. In practice therefore, this right is hard to fully attain. Surely, complaints are heard even in the most open societies once in a while that this right is being subjected to official evasion. But if it may be an exception in those societies, it is almost customary in Nepalese society. The society is more closed than open. This has resulted in a rather queer habit which is to go by guessing motivations. What could he be saying? Why did he say? What does he mean? These are the questions which one has to encounter with all the time, while trying to find the meanings of words, particularly when matters of delicate nature are concerned. Under the impact of the environment created by this situation, Nepalese press has also developed a habit which proceeds by guessing and even questioning motivations, which as I understand, is highly undemocratic in nature. What right have I, as a journalist, to question others' motivations and go by whatever I assume instead of going by whatever he says in so many words? Should not I stop at the words that have been spoken? The well-known principle of having reports verified thus also becomes a casualty to this environment more often than not.

I have tried to give an illustration of what happens in practice when journalism is performed in such an environment. There can be any variety of manifestations of this contradiction when journalism has to operate in a less than transparent social condition. I will not go further into this question. But at this stage, I am reminded of a newspaper advertisement in the United States which I came across when I was receiving training there. This advertisement called on its readers to inform whatever happened to them and to their families because they constituted news and the society would be interested to know about them. This could be even elopement, that is, if somebody in one's family had eloped with somebody. Now if I were to expect such reports from my readers for dissemination in Nepal, I would simply be mad to do so. In fact, in most cases, if I were to report such things in a newspaper, I might be target of anger of many people. So climates do matter. Culture matters, traditions matters, customs and manners matters. I myself cannot get totally out of it, however ultra-modern may claim to be.

But as I said at the very outset of this brief writing, one is also subject to the thrust of whatever the modernisation process is. There is thus a degree of confusion in our behaviour being pulled in two different directions, by tradition on the one hand, and modernity on the other. But there is also a struggle to wrest oneself free from it and step into a regime of smooth consistency, whatever that may be, and whether such a state of intellectual existence is ever attainable.
Having said this much by way of background, it may be stated that the efforts being made intermittently to restore moral order in the area of journalism, a number of attempts have been made so far to lay down the ground rules to make its performance consistent with universally accepted norms. If I am not wrong, not to talk of other endeavours in the past, a number of journalists met as far back as 1985 to draw up a code of conduct. It was forgotten. Then other efforts were made. Quite recently, the Press Council, which itself is a body appointed by the Government, formulated a code of conduct. There was nothing new in it, as there could not have been. But journalists criticised it by taking the position that it was not for a Government-appointed press council to decide that code, which should be, on the other hand, a product of the freewill of the journalists themselves. More recently, that is only a couple of months back, Nepal Journalists Association adopted a code of conduct after discussions in several seminars.

The situation stands there as of now. But whereas nobody can say that the performance of Nepalese journalism is and has been in continuous violation of universally accepted norms of the profession, nobody can claim either that things are or have been perfect in this regard. They are far from perfect but as I have noted above, there does exist a constant engagement with this problem. It is this engagement which in its process should be and may be expected to elevate the profession at ever higher heights of ethical existence. For one thing, there is a growing awareness in the journalist community in Nepal that even to remain credible and enhance one's credibility, the fourth estate must not only adhere to the given norms but also appear sincerely striving to do so. What accentuates this awareness is also a traditional belief to equate the written word with the Goddess of Learning, Saraswati. She is not expected to be defiled. And one of the ways not to do so is to adhere to given morals. But as I have mentioned above, even such beliefs have become weaker because of the intrusion of modernity. So, it does not work, particularly where such a contentious profession as journalism is concerned. But it is not wholly dead too. That keeps one looking for truth, however reluctant though one may be to do so, even for personal reasons. Yet another factor which keeps this question live is the very multiplicity of news media. The very requirement of survival in the resultant situation of increasing competition constitutes a compelling reason for newspapers and journalists to remain tuned to this question so that they may not appear less credible than their competitors in the eyes of the people.

As far as one can see, the question of ethics in the media sector is a question of process. It involves construction of a culture. If it is so,
then it must be said that Nepalese journalism is embarked in this direction.

It is certainly not a smooth sail. But building culture has never been a smooth sail anywhere. Neither has it occurred overnight. It takes its time. All that one can do is to hasten the process.