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Role Of Media In The All-Round Development Of Nepal

By

Shyam Bahadur K C
ROLE OF MEDIA IN THE ALL ROUND DEVELOPMENT
OF NEPAL

-by Shyam K.C.-

Media and national development in developing countries like Nepal are closely linked. In many cases, the former has to play a role of a catalyst spurring on development process so that the country can catch up with the rest of the developed world or at least with the developed among the developing countries. The media, no doubt, has a more appropriate subject in politics which continue to dominate the pages of newspapers and fill the air-time on radio in many developing countries. But the media would also be failing in its duty if the all-important subject of development, economic, social as well as political, is neglected at any time.

In the more developed societies where the media has developed both in terms of quality and quantity, and where development as we know it in the Third World virtually does not exist, the fourth estate can afford to tackle a variety of topics from who wears what at an evening party to why a speck of dust gathers on a spiral atop a multi-storeyed building. The media in the developing countries, while they need not neglect what is touched upon by the developed media, cannot afford to give them the same priority. Indeed, when the struggle is how best to feed the hungry millions, all else assume the form of trivia. No wonder, therefore, that the media in the Third World is mostly concerned about corruption and inefficiency of governments which result in directly hampering development efforts.

Media in Nepal:

The press in Nepal is a relatively new introduction. True, there did exist a weekly government newspaper over
seventy five years ago but that was all there was to journalism. The government paper, known as the GORKHAPATRA, was nothing if not a government pamphlet. Yet, for years until 1951 when the old Rana autocracy was overthrown and semblance of democracy ushered in, the Gorkhapatra was the only newspaper in the Kingdom. There, of course, is a reason for the government monopoly. For one thing, the dictatorial regime was harsh and the permission needed for bringing out any new publication was never given. On top of that, the topography of Nepal is harsh and difficult and does not generally encourage mobility among the people. About 800 kilometres long, Nepal is about 180 kilometres broad at its broadest. The country can be divided into three neat belts: the terai plain in the south, the middle hills and the high mountains in the north.

Roads were hardly in existence and it took daring travellers anywhere from ten days to one month to move from one place to another. The telecommunications facilities were virtually non-existent. The telegraph system with the outside world was managed by the Indian Embassy and the only telephone long distance link was with Birgunj from the capital, and this too did not function most of the time. There were just three printing presses in Kathmandu Valley and perhaps not more than half a dozen in the whole of the Kingdom. It was, therefore, not surprising that the print media in Nepal started rather late. As far as radio was concerned, the picture here too is not different. The Rana rulers could hardly afford to start radio transmission and allow the people to know of the freedom and democratic struggles taking place in different parts of the world.

It was against this background that Nepal gained democracy from the autocratic rule of the hereditary Rana prime ministers, who incidentally were the name of the reigning King. In the early fifties soon after the democratisation of the country,
the very few printing presses in existence began publishing newspapers. These numbered not more than two, and were unbashed the dominant political party. Thus the Gorkhapatra which began publishing twice a week and the two newspapers were all propaganda sheets having little to do with objective journalism.

Little by little, however, printing presses began to come up, though admittedly most of them were concentrated in the Nepalese capital, and more newspapers began to be published. The political system too moved towards a more responsible form and the country's first general election was held in 1959. At this stage, there was a proliferation of newspapers but even as the parliamentary democracy was short-lived so was the new enthusiasm of the press. Following the dismissal of the elected government in December, a large number of newspapers closed down. The parliamentary democracy was replaced by the partyless panchayat system and there were a number of curbs on the press, and this did not exactly help in the development of fair, unbiased and frank journalism in the country. However, in 1979, early April to mid-May, there was political agitation all over the Himalayan Kingdom and King Birendra on May 25 called for a national referendum to determine the system the people liked: reformed panchayat system or the western style multi-party system. The people chose the reformed Panchayat system but the important thing about the call for referendum by the Nepalese monarch was that since the King's broadcast over Radio Nepal, the press in Nepal has been more free than at any time in the 22-year-old Panchayat system.

The only electronic media in Nepal is Radio Nepal. Television is yet to come. Radio Nepal, fully controlled by the government, began broadcasting about 32 years ago. Its policy has been straight: to function as an instrument of the government.
Development:

If the entry of the mass media in Nepal was a late development, that of planned development was even later. It was not until the mid-fifties that the country's first five-year economic plan was launched. Cut off from the rest of the world for 104 years, the country's first attempts at planned development was slow and painstaking.

The important and most difficult challenge was building the basic infrastructure. The life expectancy of an average Nepalese was less than 30 years. The total length of roads in the Kingdom which had stood at 376 kilometres at the onset of democracy in 1951 had been increased to just about 624 at the start of the Five Year Plan in 1956. The production of energy was less than half a megawatt.

The challenge of development under the circumstances was indeed very difficult. And the very low literacy rate, of less than four percent further complicated the process of development. In the 32 years since the advent of democracy in Nepal, significant progress has been made in various spheres. The average life expectancy has now reached 48 years, thanks largely to the spread of health facilities in the rural areas. The total length of roads in the country has shot up to over 5,000 kilometres. The literacy rate has gone up to 25 per cent. The power production in the country has reached just over 100 megawatts. Yet the process of development is far from over and indeed many contend that the rate is too slow to meet the ever-growing population which now stands at slightly over 15 million.
The Nepalese government's current budget for the Sixth Five Year Plan stands at 33 billion 940 million rupees. This is by far the largest and most ambitious of all state plans in Nepal. Yet plans by themselves mean little or nothing unless the people can identify themselves with projects undertaken in their areas and lend their active support.

There has been a remarkable spurt in the primary school enrolment. The latest figures show that out of a total school age children of 1.132 million, 875 thousand or 77 percent of them in 1978 were enrolled in primary schools. This is a tremendous boost for a country just stepping into the modern age. Admittedly, many of them drop out before they complete their primary education, yet even the very fact that parents who are used to using their children as labour and helping hands in farms, are sending them to school augurs well for the country. The primary education (Class I to V) has been made free but not compulsory, and textbooks up to Class V are provided free. The two factors have contributed to the sharp rise in the primary school enrolment.

It is generally agreed that the attitude of the people is the crucial factor in the development of the country. The need for attitudinal change among the people to convert them from the traditional outlook to a more modern one is now recognised to be the most effective instrument for the development of the country. It has now become quite fashionable for the political leaders and journalists to work to bring about the necessary transformation in the thinking of the people towards development, and to adopt more practical modern concepts and practices in place of outdated concepts and superstition. This then is the challenge which the mass media in the country has to shoulder.
The mass media in Nepal is unabashedly oriented towards the urban population which forms less than five percent of the country's population of 15 million. Even as the mass media continue to neglect the rural masses, so do the planners. At least it appears that not enough is being done for them. This is despite the fact that there is an universal recognition in Nepal that unless the rural areas can be changed for the better any development in the country will be only superficial. Happily, this concept of rural development is fast catching up with those who matter. Yet the mass media has not been able to break away from the traditional practice of being oriented towards the urban areas.

Agriculture continues to play a dominant role in Nepal's economy. Over ninety percent of the country's population continue to depend on this sector for their livelihood. True, the government in its development plans has continued to place top priority on agriculture along with transport and communications. Yet the plight of a Nepalese in the rural areas is none too happy. He is still far away from basic amenities like drinking water and health facilities. Employment is still a problem for them.

There are about four thousand villages in Nepal and it is rightly stated that the real Nepal lies in the villages. Yet so far both the government planners and the mass media have not done as much for the villages as they should have.

Mass Media:

Due to the topography of the country, the print media has not been able to make any headway in Nepal. The Rising Nepal, which I represent, has a circulation of about 12 thousand copies, almost all of them sold in the urban areas of Kathmandu Valley, Birgunj, and Biratnagar. The Gorkhapatra which has now become a daily and which is
an autonomous corporation has a circulation of more than 30 thousand. In recent months, the government has liberalised the licensing of newspapers and there are now over 20 newspapers and weeklies in Nepal but most of their circulation does not exceed 200 each and as such there is little positive role that the print media can play in a country steeped in poverty and low literacy.

The government controlled Radio Nepal remains the most effective form of mass communications in Nepal. It is the only media that can be heard all over the Kingdom. Yet the radio too is limited in that it has not been able to make the most effective use of the powerful medium. Development journalism is still not practised in Nepal in the way it should be. Project descriptions are sometimes given but listeners take this more as an advertisement for the government than a real progress report. It would have made much more interesting reading and listening if instead of project profiles, research on how the project has touched the life of the people affected could be used. But this necessarily takes more effort on the part of the journalists and more resources on the part of the institutions concerned.

Moreover, it is possible to be instantly linked with New York or London via the telephone or telex. But it is impossible for a man in the rural areas in Nepal to reach anybody in Kathmandu for the simple reason that such facilities do not exist. The building up of telecommunications facilities within the country thus has to keep pace with international telecommunications development if the journalists are to be made aware of the need for development journalism.
The Rising Nepal is presently running a series on a village in Kathmandu Valley. It is published once every fortnight and it touches upon different aspects of the village life in Lokanthali Village. But who reads it? Not the urban reader who is least bothered about whether the village has adequate water supply or not. But such a profile is read by those who matter and as a result of the publication of the series in the Rising Nepal, the villagers have been able to persuade the authorities to try to provide potable water to the village.

This is a small but significant achievement for the Rising Nepal. But if development is to be taken to every doorstep in Nepal and if the people are to become active participants in the quest for a better life, it is the radio more than newspapers which will have to undertake drastic changes in its programmes and orient itself to national development.