

Bhutan

By

Kinley Dorji

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Introduction

The growth of the Bhutanese press or - more appropriately perhaps - the birth of a Bhutanese press, is an interesting development in the kingdom today. While the institution, the concept, and role of the press, as it is internationally understood, has only recently been introduced in Bhutan, it is already playing a significant role in the socio-economic and political development of the kingdom.

I will not attempt a profound discourse on pluralism in a press which is still in its infancy. But the concept is very relevant to us today, especially in the context of the positive growth of the Bhutanese press over the last few years. In fact, a study and understanding of "Media and Pluralism" may be vital at a stage when we are in the process of laying the foundation and setting the directions for this noble institution. It is perhaps a critical time to discuss the national communication policies and legal frameworks affecting press pluralism, or the basic foundations of the press itself.

I outline a few simple thoughts today on the situation of the Bhutanese press and, more important, I hope to gain some valuable ideas and advice from the experience of some of the most colourful and highly developed press systems in South Asia.

Background

Because of the unique status of the Bhutanese press, it is not possible to discuss media and pluralism in Bhutan without some basic background.

There is one newspaper in Bhutan today just as it might have been in many countries when their media was first established. That is why I called it the birth of the press. The Kuensel, as it is called, is a fast changing weekly newspaper published by a printing corporation which itself is undergoing dramatic change.

This publication began as a fortnightly official gazette in the 1960s. It was published in three languages - Dzongkha, English, and Nepali - and upgraded into a weekly bulletin. In 1986, with the Bhutanese population having reached a higher level of literacy and the kingdom itself responding to development and change, the bulletin was upgraded into a newspaper. The availability of modern technology, especially high technology printing equipment, made it possible to produce the paper on the latest Desk Top Publishing system.

On October 1, 1992, the Bhutanese media - the newspaper and radio broadcasting service - took a major leap forward when it broke away from the government structure and became autonomous corporations. For those of us working in this relatively new sector of Bhutanese society, it was a historic occasion. It was not only a professional challenge to us fledgling reporters, this move set the direction for the future growth of the Bhutanese media. (Kuensel's first editorial attached).

The changes, since then, have been quite dramatic and we are witnessing fast change. When the newspaper was first published in 1986, it was met with a mixture of apprehension and interest, both for the same reason : it was Bhutan's first newspaper. Since then the Kuensel has become a weekly habit for every educated Bhutanese. It is impossible to adequately describe the total reaction of a society digesting its first newspaper but, for us in the business, it was an experience of considerable excitement.

The Bhutanese readership has matured over the brief period since then, and the newspaper is going through a period of transformation in response to this. Today, we are talking professionalism and credibility as we tackle vital issues in politics and socio-economic development. While development journalism is a key theme in a developing country like Bhutan, the role of journalism in society itself has guided us into a more pluralistic path. New features in the newspaper like an editorial and opinion page, for example, has encouraged heated debate on important issues.

The official media policy in Bhutan has been encouraging. It was the King of Bhutan who initiated and decreed the independence of the Bhutanese media from government in 1992. To quote from the royal decree:

"It is the policy of the royal government to facilitate and encourage the professional growth of the Bhutanese media which must play an important and responsible role in all areas of development. Such a role is especially relevant to the national policy of decentralisation which aims to involve all sections of the Bhutanese society in the socio-economic and political development of the kingdom.

The national newspaper, Kuensel, and the Bhutan Broadcasting Service will therefore be delinked from the Ministry of Communications to give them the flexibility to grow in professionalism and to enable them to be more effective in fulfilling their important responsibility to society."

As incongruous as it may be to talk about the establishment of the press - on the eve of the 21st century - I believe that history is being made. It is an important period for the Bhutanese media.

Problems

I feel that it is also important to highlight some practical problems that the Bhutanese press is facing today and some of the solutions we are looking at.

A major obstruction is the economics of publishing. Bhutan's population is 600,000, scattered over the rugged mountainous terrain. The literacy rate is still low among a largely rural population, and the Kuensel reaches the country's literate population with a print run of 10,000. A new private sector offers very little advertisement. Without raw materials in the country itself, we are importing everything from paper, ink, and glue to computers and software, offset printers and the related equipment. In fact, every aspect of newspaper publishing and distribution in Bhutan is extremely expensive.

Thus a limited revenue earning potential and disproportionately high publishing costs result in a major struggle to survive.

In the past the newspaper was funded by the government. But, when it achieved independence, commercialism became the top priority. Since a newspaper can only survive if subsidised by commercial activity the Kuensel Corporation, as the publisher, negotiated printing equipment and licence with the government of Bhutan. In its first year as an independent newspaper, the Corporation was able to earn more than 50 percent of its revenue, the rest being a government subsidy.

A possible happy ending, however, is a proposed Danish-assisted project which will upgrade the Kuensel Corporation's printing capability. With negotiations underway, the future is looking good, and the corporation is optimistic that commercial printing is a viable source of income to subsidise the newspaper.

Editorially, we are also dealing with the problems of introducing public discussions of issues, and public criticism, in a small and transparent society. Journalism is in a pioneering stage and journalists are forced to play a responsible role in a society which is particularly sensitive to this new development.

Perspective

It is against this background that I attempt to discuss press pluralism. But, to be able to address some of the key issues like communication policy and legal framework, I must present them in the perspective of the socio-economic and political background of the country.

As it is widely known today, Bhutan emerged from a self-imposed isolation only about three decades ago and, that too, with great caution. Supported by its closest neighbour, India, the country embarked upon the process of development. With the assistance of more development partners, including the United Nations, it achieved rapid progress. Many have described this short span of development as a leap from the Middle Ages into the wonders of the 21st century.

Priority in Bhutan's early development was, obviously, basic infrastructure and services. In terms of modernisation, the country had to be literally opened up and the foundations of a new socio-economic system built from scratch. It was only in the last few years that Butanese society turned towards electronic communication and the media.

This is well explained in the King of Bhutan's decree on the media, which also serves as a form of a Royal Charter:

"In three decades of successful planned development, Bhutan has seen rapid socio-economic growth and the kingdom has made the significant transition from its self-imposed isolation towards achieving the national goal of creating a better life for the people in a progressive and modern nation.

Today, as the kingdom enters the age of communications, its priorities are geared to meet the needs and demands of the times. The kingdom has seen a dramatic increase in the literacy rate of the population as a result of the special attention given by the royal government to the education sector. As technological advancement brings the international community closer together, it has also established the infra-structure to modernise and strengthen communications and information links with the rest of the world."

Pluralism

I will share some thoughts, at random, on the theme of the seminar.

Existing laws: There are, today, no established laws, policies, or regulations to either encourage or discourage press pluralism. There are no restrictions on the sale of foreign publications of which a good variety is available. NGOs and other organisations are introducing their own newsletters and publications. There are no conditions for obtaining a newspaper licence. But Kuensel is the sole newspaper surviving today, albeit with government subsidy, after some earlier attempts folded in a matter of months.

Pluralism: While Bhutan may lack the cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity of most of its South Asian neighbours, the society has developed a deep reverence for a balance of views. An influence, perhaps, of the Buddhist teaching of tolerance, such an imbedded set of values could not help but be a substantial influence on the press and press pluralism.

The existing pluralistic traditions of Bhutanese society can be seen in the nature of our media today. The newspaper, for example, is published in all the three written languages which exist in Bhutan. Sections of the newspaper, especially its opinion pages, are a forum for public discussion. Disadvantaged groups in society are given special coverage and the newspaper has helped bring many emerging problems to national attention.

Editorial Board: Bhutan has also had a tradition of oral debate which can be seen in both officialdom and the rural communities. The country's highest legislative body, the National Assembly, which has a nation-wide representation, is a forum for debate on issues of national interest. It is in keeping with this tradition that the National Editorial Board was formed in October, 1992. The seven members of this Board represents a wide cross section of Bhutanese society: one senior monk, a well known author and scholar, a representative of the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a retired educationist, a government finance officer, the head of the broadcasting station, and the head of the newspaper organisation.

Institutions: In Bhutan press laws, like all other laws, would be approved by the 151-member National Assembly. It would be submitted to the Assembly by the National Editorial Board which may be called on to explain or defend the proposal. It is a pragmatic practice in Bhutan that relevant laws are instituted when the society feels the need for them. New laws and amendments are regularly approved by the National Assembly, the most recent (1993) being an amendment of the Rape Act, and a new Quarantine Act.

Policy: It is a written government objective of the Bhutanese government to encourage the growth of a professional media system. Government assistance is currently provided to the media in the form of subsidies, technology and equipment, and training for media personnel. Foreign assistance is also received with official blessing. As the need for press laws, policies, and regulations arises pluralism must be a key word in their formulation.

Necessity of laws and institutions to ensure press pluralism:

It is, therefore, appropriate at this early stage of the growth of the Bhutanese press that we study the need for the relevant laws and institutions governing pluralism and, in fact, all aspects of the media. It would be pragmatic to take advantage of the existing procedures and institutions to initiate these necessary foundations for future growth.

Today's seminar, therefore, is invaluable for us. What better forum than such a gathering of eminent media persons to contribute valuable ideas for us to draw on as we make our own small attempt to build this vital institution ?