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VISUAL/INTERNET

Photojournalism: Nepali Challenges

In June 1997, Kathmandu was host to the 1996 World Press Photo Exhibition. Before the formal inauguration on June 20th, the organizers arranged a workshop for photojournalists on the theme, “Societal role of photojournalism.” They invited me to speak on the subject, perhaps thinking that having written a 10,000-word article on the history of photography in Nepal in 1994, I qualified for this job. I have never really learned the technical or artistic intricacies of photography. My only interest on the subject comes from the point of view of a researcher who thinks that photographs provide a good window into recent Nepali history and society. Despite this disclaimer, I agreed to think about the subject.

The noted photo critic, Susan Sontag once wrote, “In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They have ... an ethics of seeing.” Within the genre of photojournalism this ethics of seeing can manifest itself in what

one famous practitioner once called “concerned photography,” one that, in the words of writer Mac Margolis, creates “an aesthetic of outrage.” Photography’s code has forced us to note the tragedy of the unfortunate, the injured, and the condemned underclass inhabitants of this world. Through their act of immediate non-intervention (Sontag wrote, “The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene.”), photojournalists have intervened in how we have come to know the real world in significant ways.

Judged against such high expectations, what can we say about the current state of Nepali photojournalism? To begin with, we have to recognize some significant absences. No student of history has done any full-length research on the history of photography or photojournalism in Nepal. Despite some writings on the history of the Nepali print media, there does not exist even a single essay that looks into the history of photojournalism in Nepal. These absences indicate that we have not reflected upon what communicative roles photographs have performed as part of the print media in our recent past. Given this lacuna, we are not in a position to say anything significant about the societal role of photojournalism in Nepal.

Capsule history: Soon after the 1839 announcement regarding the invention of the daguerreotype photography in France, print media in the West started publishing photos. These early photos were done with wood engravings. Initially they had to be printed and bound separately from the printed text as no technology was available for simultaneous printing of photos and texts until the arrival of the halftone printing plates in the 1880s. This possibility of mass reproduction of photographs in the media gave birth to various illustrated newsmagazines in Europe. By the 1920s, the mixture of photos and text as a potent form of mass communication was an established phenomenon in the West.

Even though the research done so far has shown that the first photographs inside Nepal were taken as early as 1863, we do not know for sure when the first photojournalistic shots were taken inside Nepal. However we can be pretty sure that this occurred in the course of a visit to Nepal by one of the British dignitaries around the turn of the century. The photograph from 1911 (most likely taken by Earnest Brooks and reproduced in my 1994 article) that shows Chandra Shumsher welcoming King George V in an extremely deferential manner was published as part of the reportage of the King's hunting trip to the Nepal tarai. This photo was widely reproduced in several British Indian newspapers and is probably one of the most celebrated photos in the early history of photojournalism on Nepal.

If we are to go by the account given by Grisma B Devkota in his *Nepalko Chapakhana ra Patra-Patrikako Itihas* (2024 v.s.), *Gorkhapatra* first published a photo in late April 1927. Although not strictly a work of photojournalism, Balkrishna Sama's picture reportage of the 1934 earthquake was published in a book by Brahma Shumsher. Devkota mentions that in 1940, the *Gorkhapatra* imported a machine which made halftone photo-blocks in 12 hours. In the early 1960s another such machine was bought by the Publicity Department of the Nepal government. This slow technology of mass photo reproduction remained the same for most of the Panchayat years. But in the last ten years, desktop publishing and offset printing have reduced the processing time for photos in the print media to a few minutes.

While a detailed analysis of the use of photojournalism during the Panchayat era remains to be done, we can safely say that like most other things, photojournalism's primary agenda was to serve the interest of the Panchayati state. Since ritualistic invocation and public management of *bikas* organized around the monarch were high in that state's agenda, photos in government-owned print media

were appropriated, in the main, to serve those objectives. If the text of *Gorkhapatra* and *The Rising Nepal* constructed an official version of social reality, their photos reinforced that phenomenon. An occasional photo or two in the oppositional print media punctured the claims of the Panchayati state but under its dominant press regime, a self-critical reflective approach toward the use of photos in the Nepali media could not be fostered.

The present and the future: Looking at the current state of Nepali photojournalism, we would first have to acknowledge that the presence of staff photographers in some of the private broadsheet dailies is an indication of the importance they have given to this genre of reporting. This is a clear recognition of the fact that photographic information is an integral part of the print media. However, due to lack of a rigorous collaboration between the editors and the photographers, the latter are largely left to their own whims regarding their performance with the camera.

In the magazine front, the story is relatively dismal. Established magazines such as *Mulyankan* and *Bimochan* and newcomers such as *Sports Time* and *Across* (just to name a few) routinely publish photographs without even giving appropriate credits - quite unthinkable in the case of texts - to the photographers. This abysmal practice is also carried out by the popular newsweeklies that also tend to reproduce, without permission, photographs first published elsewhere. Photojournalists have also complained that otherwise competent editors of magazines seldom find the time to discuss the story matter before assigning the photographs. They add that these editors often treat photojournalists as if they were simply camera-clicking technicians whose opinions on the jobs at hand do not matter.

In this scenario, it is but natural for photojournalists to feel that editors and publishers are exploiting them. They have, quite rightly, raised the issue of copyright over their work and demanded that they be paid a decent amount for their photographs. But as long as

photojournalists do not act collectively against those editors and publishing houses that misuse their work routinely, nothing is going to change. Editors and publishers also need to recognize that their use of someone else's photographs, without permission and without proper credits, is equivalent to stealing.

In a different note, we need to remember that the eyes of the photojournalists that capture a fragment of reality for us are determined by the various political dispensations of the era that also dictate what counts as a photojournalistic event. Hence, without regular professional discussion and reflection—across political lines—on how the camera intervenes in the recording of the world out there, photojournalists can easily fall prey to the practice of recording monotonous images. No matter how the captions might try to augment the intended message of the photo, the process of the interpretation of a photograph is also dependant on the eyes of the reader. Hence, even when the photojournalist intends to create an aesthetic of outrage through her photographs, their generic familiarity might jeopardize that mission. To be blunt, the reader-observer will not be outraged by banal images of the unfortunate.

Hence, photojournalists need to wake up to the fact that images of *Khates* (street-children) on the streets of Kathmandu or of a 'girl child' carrying a heavy load of firewood now has limited potential for creating a moment of revelation regarding Nepali society. For a continuous disruption of the insularity of official versions of Nepal, visuals and narratives that reveal other Nepals are needed. Creative mixture of photographs and texts and their continuous mutual reinforcement against banality might be the only hope for the cultivation and sustenance, among Nepali readers, of a new visual code that is outraged at instances of injustice or hypocrisy. We can hope that creative Nepali photojournalists might continue to surprise us with visuals that alter our ethics of knowing.

Bhanubhakta: The Failure of a Historical Film

After months of media hype, the ‘historical’ film *Adikavi Bhanubhakta* was shown in three cinema halls of Kathmandu during the second half of July 1999. In two of those halls, the show did not last for more than a few days and in the remaining one, it lasted for about three weeks. When my better half and I went to see the film during a night show at Biswajyoti, the hall was practically empty. I don’t know if this film is being shown in cinema halls in other parts of the country but judging by its record in Kathmandu, it must be considered a super flop. Those who invested in its production (in addition to the grant received from the government) and those who acted in it are probably not be very happy with how the film did in the market in the country’s capital.

Commentaries on how the film was ill made for various reasons appeared in different print media once the premier show took place on 20 July 1999. This was to be expected. Even

The Kathmandu Post, 3 September 1999; original title ‘The Failure of a ‘Historical’ Film’

when it is described as a ‘historical’ film, it is, like all films, an artistic representation. Hence once it is made and shown, it is open to various interpretations. It can hardly be expected to satisfy the tastes of all viewers whose bases for interpretation are heterogeneous. Some complained about how it lacked a good storyline, others suggested that the camera work was not up to the mark. Yet others have wondered just how ‘historical’ this film really is. They have argued that it has failed to convey much of the sense of the setting of Chundi Ramgha, the home of the poet Bhanubhakta, of the mid-19th century.

The film not only fails to provide us with a broad introduction to the physical environs where Bhanubhakta grew up but also to the complex social composition of the mid-hills of central Nepal. In its flat portrayal of the social and cultural upbringing of Bhanubhakta, the film remains, at best, a one-sided story. It exhibits a precocious *adikavi* (original poet)-in-the-making, followed by the revelatory (but disputed in academic history) encounter with the *ghansi* (someone who cuts grass), translation of Ramayana and other familiar episodes from the Bhanubhakta-hagiography school made famous by Motiram, Suryabikram Gyawali and others. This hagiographic quality of the film, I am certain, was what put off many of its viewers. Even those who were in support of the idea of the making of a film on Bhanubhakta are now saying that similar films on the likes of Laxmi Prasad Devkota and others should not be made!

When criticisms of the film surfaced, some of the literary heavyweights associated with its making countered by saying that attempts to raise controversies about *Adikavi Bhanubhakta* are not kosher. They have even added that since Bhanubhakta is a national *bibhuti* (hero), such criticism is not good for the health of the Nepali nation. In their view, such criticism amounts to an act of anti-nationalism. However, to my mind, criticism can be

interpreted in this manner only by those who are either very naive about the politics of artistic representation or who are nostalgic about the Panchayat years when an official reading of ‘historical’ Bhanubhakta—he supposedly executed the second and emotional unification of Nepal through his use of the Nepali language in the Ramayana—was the only interpretation possible in the public media. Since people who are trying to forestall criticism are anything but naive with respect to the politics of representation, I can only suppose that they love the imposed singularity of the Panchayati mode of interpretation and its silent compliance. If not, they would be encouraging and inviting the kinds of criticisms mentioned above.

The film provides us with a context to discuss the many faceted politics of ‘historical’ works of art. I do not think we have had much of a discussion in Nepal regarding the bases on which artistic creations in any of the three media—text, audio or video—can be described as ‘historical’. On what basis, for instance, does a play or film become ‘historical’? Should the standards of academic history with its own regime of evidence, modes of interpretation and conclusions be used to judge the historicity of ‘historical’ works of textual or visual art? Almost half a century ago, while writing the preface to the second edition of Balkrishna Sama’s famous play, *Bhakta Bhanubhakta*, Suryabikram Gyawali—who is a central player in the making of Bhanubhakta as a national icon—stated: “Although historical plays are written on the basis of historical truths, literary conventions allow authors the right to add non-historical elements to augment the effect of their plays.” In other words, such plays cannot stand up to the interrogation of academic history because they contain fictional elements. Referring to a person or an event in history, they are ‘historical’ first and foremost because of the effects they seek to produce. This applies to ‘historical’ films as well.

Hence, we can say that *Adikavi Bhanubhakta* is 'historical' to the extent that it tries to extend to the visual media the effect of the hagiography school of Bhanubhakta and Panchayat-era official interpretation. It tries to do so at a time when multi nationalities inside Nepal are trying to delink the connection between the Nepali language and Nepali identity. Given that its producers were familiar with the potential power and reach of film as a medium, it is no surprise that they chose to portray their hero on the large screen. However despite forcing several schools to bring their wards to watch the film, it did not survive in the market for too long. Its producers could not foresee that making the general public watch the movie was more complicated than making students (both during the Panchayat era and now) read about Bhanubhakta in their school textbooks. The market, it seems, can also be anti-hegemonic at times! And that is not so unfortunate in this case.

Beyond the Internet Hoopla

For some years now, we have been hearing a lot about the Internet. When a cybercafe opened in Kathmandu in the fall of 1997, one Nepali reporter described it in these words, “In a minute a visitor can drive into the information superhighway and browse over the internet, getting information on anything under the sun from anywhere under the sun.” The hoopla associated with quick retrieval of megavolumes of information had clearly overwhelmed the reporter whose writing is characteristic of the way in which the Internet has been talked about in Nepal in recent months. Many of its fans in our country talk about it in such a way as to suggest that it is the latest technology that will uplift our lives even beyond our imagination!

Most of the coverage about the Internet in *The Kathmandu Post* and elsewhere is usually confined to hardware and software breakthroughs achieved somewhere else in the world. If not, the reports describe the theoretical potential of e-commerce (short for electronic commerce), that is, business transactions done

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through the Internet. Not too many accounts that actually report how Nepalis are using the Internet have been published. This is unfortunate but hardly surprising. Amidst the hoopla, we have forgotten to really ask of what use all that information, collected from “anywhere under the sun” will be to us or if we can put to good use the speed at which we can communicate with each other and the rest of the e-connected world. Moreover, who is this “we” that is benefiting from e-connectivity?

After babbling about the ‘information revolution’ for some years, societies with more widespread experience of Internet use seem to be coming to terms with the idea that its most dominant domain lies in the mundane world of socializing. As Lyndon Cerejo described it in a recent article, this world is all about “meeting people, making friends, keeping in touch and hanging out. Which is why if you walk into any cybercafe today, you’ll discover that e-mail is the most used service, followed by on-line chatting. E-mail, for keeping in touch with friends and family, and chatting to make new friends and hang out with existing ones.”

In that context Cerejo adds that if you have been using the Internet “only for serious uses like education and research, loosen up and let go – there’s a lot of fun in store for you.” Such fun can be experienced through chat rooms (“virtual hangout places... where people talk with each other through their keyboards”), mailing lists (“discussion groups on various topics that anyone with an e-mail address can sign up for”), matching sites (“online matchmaking sites [that] allow you to create your profile and search for others who match up to what you look for in a friend or partner”) and directories of people (where you can search for people you want to get in touch with). Relatively cheap connections have facilitated the growth of such social worlds in the Internet elsewhere.

If that is the case elsewhere, what is our situation? E-mails and mailing lists are the chief ways in which socializing in the

Internet has occurred in our country. The total number of email users in Nepal is probably around 15,000. A significant number of them are located in *bikase* (development) institutions. There is very little evidence that information obtained through the Internet has come of use to design programs that will solve Nepal's development problems. There seem to be a few dozen mailing lists, but not too many of them are really active—and more importantly informed—discussion forums. E-connectivity alone cannot overcome our lethargy and ignorance.

Until access costs (both computer hardware and server charge per minute) are drastically lowered, it is unlikely that Nepalis (in Nepal) will participate in any significant numbers in chat rooms. In addition, as long as English remains the language of Internet communication (due in part to the lack of standard Devnagari based communication software), the Internet will remain a socializing world for a small number of Nepalis who can use that language with some degree of proficiency.

In saying all this I am making the argument that instead of being caught in the hoopla about the Internet, we should begin to look at it as yet another technology and medium available to Nepal's elites for their own interests and pleasure, both professional and personal. In saying so, I am not denying the fact that quick-connectivity has facilitated communication among some people and institutions, giving birth to new networks. It has also made possible the regular publication of entities such as the *Review of Books* in the *Post* and other print (yes print) media. But the Internet has hardly brought a revolution – in any sense of the word – in the lives of Nepalis at large. Nor will it in the future. In a country where a majority of the population does not have access to electricity, and only about 2% can ever afford to buy a computer at the current prices, hyperbole – sorry cyberbole – about the Internet is certainly not in order.