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PRINT

Watching the Op-Ed Pages

As a columnist for *The Kathmandu Post*, I often wonder who reads what appears in the op-ed pages of our newspapers. Since the start of my column in that paper, only a few of my essays have drawn responses from the readers. The rest have gone without comment, leaving me to wonder if I had said anything worth saying at all! However I do not mean to suggest that every piece of op-ed writing should evoke letters from readers. Gratifying it is to see ideas first expressed in the column being expanded upon by others in other forums, even without a reference to the original piece. This is, I guess, permissible journalistic practice, although it would draw charges of plagiarism in my other field, academia.

As far as I know, no studies have been done to find out, in a somewhat comprehensive manner, reader opinions about what has been appearing in the op-ed pages of our newspapers. To do this kind of study in a thorough manner is certainly not an easy

task in our case. This is so because of at least two reasons. First of all we have many “Ka” class (according to the classification done by the Press Council Nepal) newspapers which are, in essence, viewpapers. Where their news pages end and their op-ed pages begin is not an easy task to carry out, even if you have been a victim (like me) of a first-page ‘news’ whose contents have been cooked up in a fanciful collaboration between staff members of that paper and their patrons elsewhere. Secondly, we do not yet have analysts who are competently trained in the disciplinary paraphernalia of media studies. In their absence, even designing such a study becomes an ad hoc attempt.

I do not pretend to know much about how to analyze reader responses to op-ed pieces. However we can say a few things about who writes in these columns, what are the demographic and physical locations of the authors, and what are the subjects covered, based on a preliminary look at the set of op-ed pieces published in a single newspaper or a set of newspapers over a certain period. To give myself some concrete materials to work with, I looked at what was published in the op-ed sections of *Kantipur*, the most influential daily in the country at the moment. The period selected covered the first three months of the year 2057 v.s. (Baisakh to Asar), amounting to some 94 days.

Who writes these pieces? What are their demographic characteristics? Where are they physically located? What are the subjects covered? An overwhelming percentage of op-ed writers in *Kantipur* are men from the Bahun & Chettri communities who are physically located in Kathmandu (although it is likely that many grew up in other parts of Nepal). One comes across very few articles from members of Nepal’s *janajati* or dalit communities, or residents of the Tarai. Most of the writers are elderly (in our context), above 45 or older. During the period studied, one comes across very few articles by women. The few

that are there (apart from the ones by Gyanu Pandey who writes a fortnightly column) have been mostly extracted from various feature services including the interesting radio program Hakka-Hakki.

A great majority of the op-ed pieces in *Kantipur* are commentaries that deal with Nepali politics. Many of them have been written by politicians, some by ex- or wanna-be-politicos. Some of the non-politicians are known to be associated with certain political camps. In reading through these writings, one gets a sense that the arguments contained within them are too familiar, almost predictable ones. This happens, I would suspect, because the feature editors looking after the relevant pages are not providing adequate feedback to the writers. I do not mean to suggest that these editors should be telling what the op-ed writers should write but they should certainly tell them that an attractive style alone can not carry the burden of repeated thoughts or the addition of a prefix such as Prof. or Dr. (before the writer's name) can not ride over the superficiality of the analysis provided.

These preliminary conclusions drawn from a study of the op-ed pages of *Kantipur* of the first three months of 2057 v.s., I would suspect, are also more or less relevant to other broadsheet dailies and weeklies. Writing a letter to the editor of *Himalaya Times* (30 August 2000), Navaraj Bhattarai of Phidim in eastern Nepal complains that our 'national' newspapers do not entertain articles from people located outside the Kathmandu Valley. He also makes the additional point that the name and the face of writers seem to influence the selection of articles published in the op-ed pages, leading to the repeated appearances of writings by the same set of writers.

Along with Bhattarai, it would be timely to suggest that editors of our newspapers pay some deeper attention to what they are publishing in the op-ed pages. Feature editors need to become a

lot more alive if their pages are to cater to the needs and desires of a wide variety of readers and writers. They need to ask themselves at least the following questions: Do the set of current op-ed writers reflect the demographic characteristics of our society in terms of community, sex, age and physical location? Do the subjects covered adequately represent the set of issues of importance to our society or does politics get more than the space it deserves? Do the write-ups provide adequate treatment of the subjects or are they published to please the writers and power brokers? If current inadequacies are to be eliminated, what sorts of activities and collaborations with other institutions might be necessary? Is anybody listening?

Ersatz Nostalgia and English Journalism

I must say that I was first amused by the effort Ajit Baral makes to not mention the Martin Chautari discussion forum in his article “Guff Addas” in the issue of *Nation Weekly* dated 26 September 2004. Upon its first reading, I thought may be the omission could be justified because the writer was only interested in guff addas located in chiya pasals. However, reading the piece a second time made me realize that was not the case. After all he talks about addas in chiya pasals, around bookshops and one that meets in Trichandra College and another in Kirtipur. Certainly that kind of portfolio could have easily included Martin Chautari, recently described by Abhi Subedi as a forum in which participants are expected to sit on *cakatis* and participate vigorously. After my second reading, I began to worry about the new generation of Nepali writers and journalists who are full of enthusiasm, but I am afraid, full of ersatz nostalgia, a dangerous combination.

Nation Weekly, 3 October 2004; original title ‘Ersatz Nostalgia’

I do not want to speculate on why the writer omitted Chautari in his article. It is certainly the case that he is aware of its existence. After all he has participated in many discussions at Chautari over the past three/four years and has been the main presenter on at least one occasion. Many of the people mentioned in the article—Lok Raj Baral, CK Lal, Suresh Dhakal, Chaintanya Mishra, Govinda Bartaman, Khagendra Sangraula, Krishna Khanal, Krishna Hachhethu, Hari Sharma, and Abhi Subedi have been the main discussants at Martin Chautari on one or more occasions. Many of these same individuals and others he mentions including his fellow Pokharelis, Sarubhakta and Usha Sherchan, have also participated in Chautari discussions. When non-Nepali nationals including the Darjeeling-based writer Indra Bahadur Rai and the Calcutta-based social scientist Ranabir Samaddar (a ‘fiery communist’ of the 1970s), have presented and participated at Chautari, they have lamented the absence of such *addas* in their own hometowns. This has also been the experience of some Nepalis from other parts of Nepal and some of them have been inspired to initiate such *addas* after having seen Chautari at work.

I worry about a journalism that is based on denial. Surely, the public work of a journalist or a writer is judged by the social landscape he makes visible to the readers. When readers of this newsmagazine know about the existence of Chautari (after all *Nation* carries notices about Chautari discussions every week), they will certainly wonder when one omits any discussion about this particular *adda*.

Had this been a simple case of a writer being bent on insulting the intelligence of *Nation*’s readers, this omission wouldn’t have deserved a mention here. But it is suggestive of a larger lacuna in English-language journalism in Nepal and that is why I am worried. A write-up that cannot interrogate a case of homegrown success while pretending to describe the “changing urbanscape”

of a particular theme is not journalism. It also raises questions about the process of editorial value addition to inadequate copies submitted by in-house or outside writers.

Chautari's record speaks for itself. Started in October 1991 as an informal discussion forum regarding development issues (among its founders are Bikash Pandey and the late Martin Hoftun), it has become the longest existing such forum in Nepal. Initially its *addas* were scheduled two times a month, now 16 scheduled discussions take place each month. As demand has grown, it is not unusual for Chautari to hold one or more additional unscheduled discussions each month. Despite *banda*-induced cancellations, it managed to hold 195 such discussions during the last fiscal year (i.e., mid-2003 to mid-2004). The list of those discussions also demonstrates the variety of themes that Chautari has brought into the discussion arena. Moreover many discussions held at Chautari have given birth to research agendas, friendships between participants, and much more. Since the article laments about the 'closed' nature of other *addas* in town, one should also take note of Chautari's ability to attract a continuous group of new and young Nepalis to participate in multiple-direction conversations, a point emphasized by journalist Raghu Mainali on 14 September 2004 when Chautari held an open session in which it invited critical comments and suggestions from one and all about its work. If Chautari *adda* has entered its 14th year at a time when such *addas* have disappeared from some of the more intellectually sexy metros of the world, then it is doing something right.

There is a passage in the article that refers to milestones in world history to account for the decay in the culture of *addas* elsewhere. Therein the article quotes columnist CK Lal pliantly regarding how "the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the march of globalization" is responsible for the death of high left idealism and the dying culture of *addas* elsewhere. Lal should

have been challenged to explain how precisely in that same era the Chautari *adda* was born and it grew tremendously and how Chautari brought the likes of Lal and Khagendra Sangraula together in the same room in the mid and late 1990s. What idealism informed such an encounter? Anyone who knows a bit about the history of so-called ‘democratic’ and ‘progressive’ intellectual camps in Nepal would have noted that such an encounter was no small achievement then.

As a former convener and (at present) a member of the executive committee of Martin Chautari, I do not seek praise for the work we have done. I seek critical appraisal. Critical appraisal means, among other things, asking simple but probing questions: How did Chautari thrive in an era in which many of the other *addas* in Kathmandu died? Why has it been able to attract an average of 30 people in each of its sessions? Why are new young people who are thinking about a variety of career options coming to Chautari week after week? Anyone writing about Chautari need *not* have talked to any of Chautari’s organizers but could have interviewed some of the young participants and asked them what prompts them to come to Thapathali, week after week? Answers to these simple questions would reveal the reasons for the success and longevity of a single *adda* in Nepal and contribute to a real debate about *adda* culture in our society. Such analysis is basic journalism, nothing more.

I have picked up on the *guff adda* article because it is representative of a new tendency among young journalists writing in English in Nepal today. Simply put, in an attempt to be ‘chic,’ their writings are replete with ersatz nostalgia about far-off places and fascination with globally visible people. They also contain non-illuminating quotes from heavyweights, as if these lines can make up for the lack of thorough research. I have begun to wonder how despite all their readings and at time beautiful mastery

of the English language, these journalists produce such pedestrian quality writings about Nepal.

Can our young journalists and writers who talk about Paris and America to lament about conditions at home conceive of their worlds alternatively? Can they evaluate homegrown contexts and institutions with historical depth, the only kind of journalism that matters in the long run? Can they demonstrate to us that they are interested in Nepal described in words that are the products of good research, diligence and fair analysis? Can they show to us that beyond name-dropping, their wide reading contributes to our understanding of a complex Nepal? Finally, can they drop their ersatz nostalgia for a revolutionary Calcutta “thick with smoke and the smell of rum” and Parisian pubs and coffeehouses and ask if Thapathali has lessons for Calcutta and Paris?

The Plight of Dogmatic Weeklies

Some time ago, I was accused by the weekly *Dristi*—which is a mouthpiece of the political party, Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) - of having taken Rs 13 lakhs from ActionAid Nepal (an international NGO) in the presence of Dilli Bahadur Chaudhari, President of Backward Society Education (BASE) and the convenor of the Kamaiya Andolan Paricalan Samiti. The report stated that the money had been given to me for the rehabilitation of the ex-Kamaiyas but I had absconded with it and used it for personal ‘uplifting’. This, it was reported, was found out by ex-Kamaiyas who had gone to ActionAid Nepal (AAN) asking for help! The report then implicated both Dilli and unidentified officials of AAN of colluding with me in this ‘embezzlement’.

In a subsequent issue, *Dristi* published a letter from Dilli who thoroughly denied the validity of the original report. I had done much the same verbally to its editor. While doing its original piece, no reporter of that newspaper had contacted me or Dilli to check

the facts. No one in AAN had been quoted. No documents had been cited to prove my 'crime'. On top of all this, no ex-Kamaiyas had approached AAN for help in the manner indicated by the paper. In my conversation with its editor Sambhu Shrestha, I pointed out that the original report had been written without following the basic tenets of journalism and he conceded this point. Nevertheless, after printing Dilli's letter, the weekly felt it necessary to again claim that in fact I had taken the money and misused it. Such is the dogma of CPN(UML) patronized journalism these days that a newspaper classified as belonging to the A category in the classification of Press Council Nepal and an editor who has been a member of the Council can print something without following basic journalistic skills.

If that is so, how do we understand the emergence of this particular 'news'? Earlier in the summer, in his capacity as the convenor of the above-mentioned Samiti, Dilli had asked Martin Chautari to manage the *dharna* by Kamaiyas in Kathmandu's Bhadrakali. As is well-known, this act by erstwhile Kamaiyas forced the Nepali Congress government to announce the end of the bonded-labour system on 17 July 2000. During the *dharna*, Dilli provided funds to cover real costs involved in transportation, food, housing (more than 130 Kamaiyas and volunteers who had come with them were put up in a Dharmasala in Gausala), printing (of pamphlets and banners), medical expenses (several Kamaiyas were taken to hospitals for various treatments), and communication costs. All of the expenses were accounted for by the time Dilli left for west Nepal on 22nd July 2000. No individual in the Chautari team was paid even one rupee for their more than two-weeks of around-the-clock labour to prepare for and manage the *dharna*.

As I have said in a radio interview and in print, although some people have congratulated the Chautari for its role in a crucial stage of the Kamaiya movement, we think that our support was

of a modest nature at best. However even this was too much for self-appointed 'saviours' of Kamaiyas - both individuals and institutions - in the UML camp. Having done various projects for the Kamaiyas since 1990, they felt as though they deserved all the credit. Seeing that much of the credit for helping the andolan was going to Dilli and not having the guts to challenge him upfront (after all none of these institutions have the kind of ground support in west Nepal enjoyed by BASE), their attention was deflected to me. And faithful *Dristi* had one more item to embellish its dogmatic journalism (which is an oxymoron to begin with).

I write this not to clear my name against the professionally inept work of a UML newspaper. Instead I do so to highlight the plight of the Nepali language weeklies, especially those that blindly follow the dogma of particular political parties including UML and NC. Given the increasing frustration of the reading public with the present nature of political parties, these are difficult times for these newspapers. Circulation has stagnated for the last 3-4 years (except for one which is a mouthpiece for the Maoists). In the last two-three years, several weeklies have folded. Many of those no longer in publication belonged to the ML camp. Some newspapers pushing the Maoist dogma have also ceased publication. This routine has also been observed in the NC and UML camps, although the demise rate is relatively small for newspapers in these two camps for obvious reasons. But it is also true that many new weeklies continue to emerge in the national newspaper market. According to insiders, this is happening because the money needed to run such a paper for a year even in loss amounts to a few lakh rupees. There are many politician-businessmen sets with this kind of money in today's Nepal.

The reassuring growth of other forms of print media - broadsheet dailies and magazines - has meant that many of the best reporters working for these newspapers have moved on to

these other publications. Those who remain do so (with a few exceptions) for mainly two reasons: they are pawns of political parties masquerading as journalists or less-than-mediocre pen pushers who could not get any other jobs. Morale among those working in these newspapers is said to be quite low as they see their peers moving ahead in other publications from strength to strength. Since there is very little room for professional performance and improvement, almost no quality work shows up in our weeklies. There is an occasional brilliant feature or investigative write-up but they are rare. With no further professional investment (both in terms of management and editing) these weeklies seem to be on their way out—not physically of course but in terms of performing a useful watchdog function.

On Reporting Sports

As we approach the SAF games to be held in Dhaka in December 1993, the papers have been full of reports on how the present regime in control of the National Sports Council (NSC) has not managed its affairs well. The shenanigans of the NSC are legion. Its inability to hold national level tournaments in almost all the sports in the past several years has made some commentators nostalgic about the Sharad Chandra Shah era. That the NSC has no vision when it comes to the long-term development of sports in the country is perfectly clear from what has been reported thus far. The ad hoc committees running the various sports associations affiliated with the NSC, excepting a few, have done nothing on their part and deserve to be blamed as much as the NSC for the country's sporting mess. Journalists have also, quite correctly, highlighted the lack of training facilities that impede the progress of the few self-motivated sportspersons.

Does this mean that there has been no progress in any sport in the country in the past decade? Does this mean that there is

no other interesting aspect of the sports scene to report? Can we, readers, expect some sociologically informed sports reporting? Shouldn't our sports journalists take an occasional break from NSC-bashing and give us some sense of the distance traveled by a sport or two in the last 10 or 20 years?

When I was growing up, I was in direct contact with two groups of sportsmen (yes, they were all men): bodybuilders and track athletes. Over ten years ago, my direct contact with them ended. The people whom I then watched pumping iron in a gym in Thamel and running the laps in the Dasharath stadium have largely retired from their respective sports. I now rely on the papers to tell me what is happening in those two sports these days, but even a brief 'direct' contact makes me believe that sports-reporting leaves a lot to be desired.

Take for example, the case of the "Mr Kathmandu" Prize Money Open Body Building Championship – 1992 organized by Kathmandu Jaycees and sponsored by Iceberg held at the City Hall on 22 November 1992. In checking the papers to find out how this event was reported, I discovered that most did so in the usual way. All of the reports I read told the readers that Mr. Gyanendra Nakarmi of Nepal Byayam Mandir was declared "Mr Kathmandu." Some added that he was presented the running shield by the Home Minister Mr. Sher Bahadur Deupa and was given a cheque of Rs. 15,000 by Iceberg. Others also reported that Ishwar Shrestha was declared runner-up (prize money: Rs.7,000) with three additional awards: "The Most Muscular," the "Best Back" and the "Best Arm." Yet others mentioned the names of the finalists who were ranked up to the sixth position and the prize money they had won.

The usually informative reporting of the veteran sports writer, Kheladi, was disappointing on that occasion. Kheladi's "Winning as a Habit" (*The Independent*, 2 December 1992) revealed

that he did not even attend the tournament and based his write-up on a tete-a-tete with Nakarmi “shortly after” his win. While Kheladi complained a lot about the condition of body- building as a sport in Nepal in his write-up, he did not tell us who organized this tournament, who sponsored it, and how much money the sponsors spent as prize money. That a ‘private sector’ spent close to Rs. 40,000 for sponsoring this event should have been a fact worth reporting before writing a sentence like “If an institution like the NSC cannot conduct its own tournaments on schedule, the situation in the private sector can easily be imagined.”

None of the ten plus reports I saw said the following which I personally found to be interesting: (1) No less than 17 of the 20 finalists had Newar surnames; (2) A packed City Hall audience included less than 10 women and (3) During individual posing with music, which constitutes one segment of a body-building competition as per international rules, four body-builders chose music from Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon*: one chose a re-rendering of Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*; another a Hindi pop and the rest, diverse selections from popular ‘western’ music. No songs in any of the Nepali languages were used for this purpose.

The predominance of Newars in this competition is probably not a fluke. Bodybuilding as a sport is largely concentrated in the Valley and some of the most well-known bodybuilders of an earlier generation were Newars. For example, Sanu Manandhar (who was introduced as “probably the oldest body-builder in Nepal”), and Nilakantha Manandhar (a four-time Mr Nepal known for his amazing abdomens) were two of the judges. Shiva Lal Shrestha, one of the early winners of “Mr Nepal” title was the chairman of the organizing committee. However, there have been exceptions too in the likes of Henry Bobby Timothy – native of Kerala who lived in Kathmandu in the 1960s and the 1970s

and winner of the first “Mr Kathmandu” title in 1973 – and Gyanashyam Mukhia (“Mr Kathmandu” title in 2033 v.s. and “Mr Nepal” in 2038 v.s.). Stereotyped since the days of early Shah-rule as a ‘non-martial people’ does this soft statistic indicate an alternate assertion of Newar masculinity?

Does the use of non-Nepali music for posing suggest that despite years of pumping iron, the performance itself remains essentially foreign? Or does it speak for Kathmandu’s hybrid self? Kathmandu now has, I am told, more than 30 gyms. How does one account for this growth? Is there a continuity in the culture of these ‘modern’ gyms with that of the *byayam akhadās* of an earlier era? These are questions worth pursuing.

How about athletics? While talking to a former middle-distance runner, I found out that the scene in athletics (for men) was not very dismal either. In the 400m, the winning time in 1980 used to be about 52 or 53 seconds. Today at least four runners routinely run under 50 seconds. While during 1979, Baikuntha Manandhar was running 5000m in about 15 minutes and 20 seconds, there are at least seven or eight runners today who routinely run that distance under 15 minutes. The progress in 800m is even more significant. During the late 1970s, for the Nepali runners, the 2-minute barrier for that distance perhaps seemed as formidable as the 4-minute barrier for the mile must have seemed for Euro-American athletes in the early 1950s. Those of us who watched Jodha Gurung run the 800m in 1 minute and 59.6 seconds in Kathmandu in 1979 can remember the awe with which we celebrated that performance. I am now told there are at least 10 runners who routinely run the distance under two minutes, the best time being somewhere close to 1 minute and 51 seconds. Apparently timings for other distances, excluding the marathon, have also been improved upon.

What is also significant is that most of the best runners today come from the army's athletics team. Until the mid-eighties, the army's teams used to 'hire' top-level civilian athletes like Baikuntha Manandhar to run their races. It is when this arrangement was discontinued, and employment of coaches by its teams encouraged that performance by their athletes has really improved. I am told that almost no non-army athlete exists at the top-level today. While school level games occasionally produce some outstanding runners, the absence of college and club level sports mean that they almost never get the opportunity to develop into top-level senior athletes. Because of the army's runners, the scene in men's athletics is not as dismal as, say in weightlifting, where after the retirement of the last generation of lifters, standards have fallen beyond recognition in most weight categories. But what is happening in women's athletics? What has happened to the road running and racing scene since clubs like the Kathmandu Road Runners' Club and Star Club stopped organizing such events in the mid-eighties?

Imaginative and informative reporting creates interested readership. This is as true for sports reporting as for any other journalistic topic. An obsession with reporting the bare results (who won and by how much?) must be superseded by a more sociologically and historically informed writing. Thinking about and through sports is after all one of the many ways in which a better understanding of our present can be achieved. And our journalists can show the way to our sociologists and historians to whom such a topic must seem trivial and not worthy of their disciplinary time.

The Magazine Boom

When I discussed the state of the Nepali language print media in Nepal with several journalists and media watchers in mid-1996, quite a few of them predicted that the next major boom would come in the genre of magazines. They were not referring to cinema or other ‘entertainment’ magazines, available in significant numbers in the Nepali media market over the last five years or so. They were referring to magazines whose contents would consist of general news and views. Some eighteen months later, we are beginning to see the results of the early phase of that boom. An unprecedented number of Nepali language magazines have hit the newsstands in recent months even as some old ones (also some new ones) have ceased publication. Hence it is not too early to take a look at this growth.

Among the magazines that have been part of this boom, we can find such titles: *Chandani*, *Grihajyoti*, *Everest Mirror*, *Golardha*, *Udgam*, *Sucharu*, *Him Sikhar*, *Yuba Spandan*,

The Kathmandu Post, 7 November 1997; original title ‘Noticing the magazine boom’

Manobinod, Jana Apeksha, Karma Chetra, Naya Chintan, Ubhar, Pokhara Masik, Naya Parbat, Sarbottam and Samiksha. Pitching themselves as magazines that cover various aspects of the social field, their contents include materials of various genres. However, most lack both the length and depth necessary for serious analytic coverage of any subject. In this regard, *Prasphutan* (lately irregular), *Kathmandu Today* ('fortnightly' but published once a month on average) and *Himal* (bimonthly) do a better job. These relatively more serious magazines, however, are yet to become financially fully solvent.

The boom market can also be seen in the variously 'left' magazines. After the demise of the very popular monthly *Surya*—whose circulation had surpassed the 20,000 mark—we saw *Paurakh* in late 2052 v.s.. About a year later, we saw the monthly *Ekkaisaun Satabdi* in the market. Associated respectively with the left weeklies *Chalpathal* and *Pratipaksa* (the latter until Bimal Nibha's team took over the weekly), these two magazines are seen to be close to different factions within the CPN-UML. *Naulo Aayam*, a bimonthly, closely forwards the cause of Comrade Rohit's left party and supplements the work of the older monthly *Bhaktapur*, published by the Bhaktapur Municipality. *Janajibro, Janakranti* and *Nawa Chetana* (formerly *Naya Chetana*) along with party magazines *Jana-Youddha, Jana-Morcha* and *Maobadi* are tied closely with CPN-Maobadi. *Sikhar* sympathizes with the left between the UML and CPN-Maobadi. *Janaghosana*, which could be associated with the left magazine brigade, has not been seen in the market since its three issues in 2053 v.s. None in this group, however, matches the regularity and circulation of the very successful monthly *Mulyankan*, noteworthy (in addition to its feature articles on the communist movement) for its serious treatment of subjects such as water resources, health, globalization and Nepali culture.

Magazines that focus on special subjects include *Aarthik Darpan*, a monthly that deals with the economy. *Grahaak* claims to be an informative magazine aimed toward industrialists, businesspeople and consumers but I have seen only one issue of it thus far. *Haka-Haki*, a quarterly, is devoted to development-related subjects and is targeted to ‘field workers’. Its layout is excellent and the contents of the three issues published thus far add to discussions on this theme found in the five-year old semi-annual *Bikas* (published by Sustainable Livelihood Forum). *Prachi*, published by INSEC for the past six years, continues to highlight issues related to human rights. The five issues of *Kanun*, a bi-monthly that looks at various subjects from the legal perspective, make for excellent reading. *Asmita* continues to highlight women’s and gender issues in Nepal even under severe financial constraints. *Bidushi* covers these fields much more irregularly. To cover environmental issues, there is *the Yuba Jagaran Paryavaraniya Manch* which claims to be a monthly but has been published very irregularly. Equally irregular is the *Gorkha Sainik Awaj* which voices the concerns of former and serving Gurkha soldiers. *Aabriti* made a brief appearance as a science magazine in 1994, and the field it vacated remains empty to date. Nepali sports lovers can choose between *New Sports Time*, a monthly, and *Khel Sansar*, a bimonthly. Various ethnic magazines (for lack of a better term) have also been published but they will be discussed in a separate write-up.

With respect to children’s magazines, the monthly *Nawa Pratibha* edited by Radha Budhathoki Magar (one of the few woman editors in Nepal) hit the stands earlier this year. It will have to do a lot of catching up if it is to be a serious competitor to the most widely read children’s magazine in the country, *Muna*, now in its eighth year of publication from the Gorkhapatra Sansthan and *Sunakesra*, a seven-year old children’s magazine.

Sansthan's popular 'youth' magazine, the ten-year old monthly *Yuba Manch*, however, has seen its circulation come down quite drastically in the past two years in part because of the huge success of *Nawa Yuba*, another youth-focused monthly. A product of *Antarkriya Prakashan* - the same organization that publishes *Mulyankan* - *Nawa Yuba* has reached the 25,000 mark in less than two years, proving yet again that cheap entertainment and sexual gossip of the Nepali 'glamour' world are not necessarily what young readers want to read.

As far as magazines that have died or almost disappeared are concerned, I regret not seeing any further issues of the quarterly, *Naya Paribes*. In the three issues that were published in 2053 v.s., it showed lots of potential as a good reportage and views magazine. Similarly I regret the disappearance of *Sampada*, which in the first two issues that I saw did a good job of reminding ourselves of our human and material heritage. Among politics-oriented fortnightlies, the early demise of *Paribes*, *Saramsha* and *Bishwamitra* must be noted. Also missed are *Sachet* and *Smriti*.

I am sure that I have failed to list several other magazines. A single person can hardly keep track of all the publications that have been part of this Nepali language magazine boom. To mark the moment, however, we can make some general observations. First this boom has come in the wake of explosive quantitative growth in all sectors of the Nepali media and is facilitated by the increasingly affordable technologies of desktop publishing. Second, most of these magazines use photos without giving proper credits. Third, there is a preponderance of thought-pieces in these publications. Our propensity to deliver one's un-researched opinion on various subjects explains this phenomenon from the point of view of writers whereas the easy way in which

bichar pieces can fill up the magazine's pages explains it from the editorial perspective.

Fourth, the contents of many of the magazine articles - their brevity and superficiality - are testimony to our current general inability to use the Nepali language for serious analysis of our society. This inability arises not because of inherent linguistic difficulties but because of structural and individual constraints inside the media sector in Nepal. Institutional support - both in terms of material and monetary resources and incentives - can hardly be found from publishing organizations that are usually in a hurry to put out magazine copies, but have no time to develop such necessary resources. Individual constraints generally result from no or poor training in journalistic technologies of writing and close to zero exposure to the analytic methods, styles and contents of social scientific inquiry. Nepal's higher education disaster and the inability of the few journalism training programs to give individual attention to trainees ensure poor analytic abilities in our journalists (this malaise is present across all sectors of the social field).

Despite these criticisms, one must note that in the various magazines currently available, there is a fair amount of good reading materials for serious readers who are willing to do some amount of shopping. Hence, it is not too much to suggest that any prescriptions regarding what needs to be done in this genre of the media must be based on a close reading of the current crop of magazines and a close familiarity with concurrent developments in the media sector in Nepal. It has become all too easy on the part of various commentators to make fun of the Nepali language media without sufficient familiarity with the contents of these various publications and without demonstrated constructive engagement necessary for improvements in this field. The preliminary exercise conducted here needs to be continued

by others elsewhere in more depth. Moreover our media organizations and journalists need to engage in capacity building exercises (in terms of institutional resources and personal skills) if the quantity boom is to be accompanied by a boom in respectable quality of our magazines.

Nepali Literary Magazines

There are a number of statements in circulation today regarding the state of Nepali literature and literary journals. Nepali literature, it is often said, has stagnated after the *Jana-Andolan* of 2046 v.s.. Some editors of literary journals lament that despite the enormous personal sacrifices they have made to put out these journals, not enough people buy them or read them. However, I am yet to see a convincing analysis that would in fact suggest that things are really bad both in the field of publications and Nepali literature in general. My own limited familiarity with both of these inter-related worlds as a reader of Nepali literature suggests that the situation is not as depressing as some people would like us to believe. There are plenty of publications and literary activity in some genres is quite substantial, both in quantity and quality.

The Mainstream Literary Journals: Many Nepali language literary journals can be found in the market today. While some are very regular, others tend to be less so. Amongst the former

The Kathmandu Post, 5 December 1997; original title 'A look at Nepali literary journals'

are publications from government-related institutions such as *Madhuparka* from the Gorkhapatra Sansthan, *Garima* from Sajha Prakashan, *Samakalin Sahitya*, *Kavita*, and *Pragya* from the Royal Nepal Academy. The first three provide a variety of writings across several genres; the fourth is a poetry special and the last named is a journal which also carries essays on literary history. Among literary magazines supported by commercial banks, we have *Mirmire*, *Samasti* and *Manobhav*. Not just because it is the oldest among the three, but also because it seems the editors are particularly capable, *Mirmire* provides the best quality stuff among these three. For works in literary history, the quarterly *Nepali*, published by Madan Puruskar Guthi must be remembered. For works within the genres of literary biography or memoirs, *Gyangunka Kura* edited by Sheshraj Siwakoti is noteworthy. For its longevity and its annual issue dedicated to the writings of women, we should note *Ratnashree*.

Other regular publications include *Unnayan*, *Dayitva*, *Rachana*, *Bagar*, *Tanneri*, *Abhivakti*, *Sugandha*, and *Sagar* (from Birgunj). Less regular are the likes of *Saraswat* (from Pokhara), *Sunkosi*, *Golardha*, *Godhuli*, *Sampresan*, *Bandana*, *Dipsikha*, *Prativa* (from Khotang), *Kramasha* (from Makwanpur), *Hamro Purusartha* (from Tamghas), *Kunjini* (Central Nepali department of Tribhuvan University), and *Brahmaputra* (produced by Indian Nepalis studying at TU Kirtipur). I have seen only one issue of *Dristikon* (from Pokhara), *Nawa Manjari* (R.R. Campus), *Payar*, *Daphechari*, and *Olan*.

The “Pragatishil” Brigade: Those writers who explicitly assert a connection between literature and politics have grouped under various *pragatishil* (progressive) writers’ camps. These camps can be directly linked with various *tundikhels* (platforms) of Nepali left-politics. *Pralesha* is the publication of Pragatishil Lekhak Sangh. *Sanskriti* is the publication of Rastriya

Janasanskritic Manch headed by writer-politician Modnath Prashit. Both of these organisations and their publications are seen to be close to the Nepal Communist Party (UML) camp. *Kalam* is run by writers sympathetic to NCP-Maobadi. Writers who have located themselves between the UML and Maobadi camps run *Bedana* (i.e., NCP-Ekata Kendra) and *Indreni*. Other journals in this brigade include: *Nepali*, *Juhi* (from Jhapa), *Utsaha*, *Bipul*, *Janmat* (from Banepa), *Saathi*, *Raato Thunga* (from Surkhet), *Naulo Kosheli* (from Thimi), and *Gandaki Sangam* (from Pokhara).

It would be preposterous on my part to suggest that I have listed all the literary journals currently in print in Nepal. It is very difficult for a single person to keep track of these publications in the absence of a library that holds them all. Nevertheless, the list I have provided, should give the readers some idea of what exists in this field. I shall not, due to space constraints, discuss the contents of these journals here. Instead I simply note a few things in connection to them.

First, there are a fair number of good Nepali literary journals in the market, put out by editors who would rather not draw the attention of the readers to the sacrifices they have made but simply provide a forum for publication of creative writings and essays of various genres. Second, some progressive writers tend to write off government-supported publications as being not very hospitable to their writings. A closer look at the contents of these journals makes it hard to support such a claim. In recent years, these journals have published some the best specimens of short stories and critical essays, both from the pen of self-proclaimed progressive writers and others who have not described themselves with that term. Most of these journals have also done well in terms of market sales.

Third, perhaps because of the inability of Nepali cultural elites to work with people from various political and social camps in a single project, none of the non-governmental publications have been able to gain wider readership among Nepali readers. For the various camps within the progressive brigade, it has become more important to run one's own journal from one's own *tundikhels* (and call others as non-followers of 'true' Marxist aesthetics) than to come together to publish a prominent *pragatishil* journal that all readers of Nepali literature would read. This orientation – to have one's own journal running – is also evident outside the progressive camps. Perhaps because of the social honor that literary editors get within the circle of cultural elites in Nepal, the temptation to publish one's own journal, however irregularly, seems to overcome the possibility of pulling together meagre resources (both editorial and market-wise) to produce a more forceful literary product.

Fourth, contrary to what some editors would like to believe, there are quite a few readers of Nepali literature. In recent times, several issues of *Madhuparka* and *Samakalin Sahitya* have completely sold out. It seems that one of the reasons why some literary journals have not sold in the market is because they are produced in less-than market friendly ways. For instance some issues of *Unnayan*, published in honor of specific literary personalities, are filled with generic memoirs and "appreciation essays". The thickness and price of these issues have far surpassed their readability. Rajendra Subedi, a prominent essayist and critic of Nepali literature who also happens to own one of the finest shops of literary books in Kathmandu told me last year that judging from the sales of his shop alone, he refuses to believe that the number of readers who buy Nepali literary works is as small as is often claimed. Editors of literary journals have to learn to make their products more attractive, both in terms of the quality of the contents and their size, Subedi had added. In other

words, “appreciation” volumes might do well in *chakari* circles but will not do well in the shops.

Fifth, editors and publishers of these journals ought to do a lot more to organize a better distribution system for their products. Even some of the more prominent journals are only available in a few shops, which in turn, do very little to satisfy the requests of discerning readers when it comes to back issues.

Finally, if one combines the fair amount of literary writings that show up regularly in newspapers and magazines to those that appear in the above journals, then volume-wise, there are hardly any complaints to be made. In terms of quality too, there is much good stuff to read for the average reader. My reading of what is being printed in narrative genres (I say this because I read very little poetry), especially short stories, memoirs, and essays, leads me to believe that Nepali literature, far from being in a state of stagnation, is quite alive and kicking. Hence those who complain about the state of Nepali literature ought to be very precise about what the lack is. Otherwise they will simply be participating in general negative-talk of which there is no dearth in Nepal.

Reading *Attitudes*

The ad announcing its arrival says it all. “The Decade— The 90’s. The Nepalese media – dominated by political, economic and other depressing issues. The question – are things really that bad? We at ATTITUDES think differently. Life is beautiful, it is to be celebrated. The trees, the birds, the hills and valleys.... People in love, your favourite T.V. programmes, ... Celebrities at home and abroad, ‘tu cheez badi hai mast mast’” With this description comes the maiden issue of *Attitudes*, a bi-monthly “happy magazine” that is about “love, life and you.”

The cover shows Arzu Rana Deuba with her man, Sher Bahadur Deuba. As she hugs him, her face seems transfixed in ecstasy; his face, in turn, shows a forced, almost non-existent smile, suggesting perhaps that he is uncomfortable with such public display of affection. After pages of miscellaneous notes – including a list of ‘ten things every man in love should have’ (now I know how to end the love-drought in my life!) – we come to the cover story,

“First Among Equals” by the editor Rabindra Giri. The text is interspersed with photographs of the Deubas in love, the sartorial elegance of Sher Bahadur being particularly noteworthy. Arzu, “a woman of substance” finds politics per se, uninteresting. Issues like environmental degradation and social problems (which remain unspecified) supposedly concern her the most. A workaholic who has traversed the vicissitudes of both personal and professional life, she is described as a “woman who’s independent, self assured yet emotional and sensitive.” The ‘yet’ in the sentence reminds this reader that we are miles away from superceding the language of gender stereotypes. Marriage, Arzu tells us, is bliss. He, while admitting that what he is today “is because of politics” apparently doesn’t bring politics home. Instead they discuss “philosophy, poetry and bed-time stories.” Sher Bahadur tells us that he “intends to take her on a holiday, far away from everything.” One is left wondering whether that will come immediately after the elections and before another round of Congress *tamasha* begins!

Two substantial articles come from the pen of Narayan Wagle. In my opinion, Wagle’s critical reportage and subtle observations on cultural production in Nepal (especially Nepali films) – as evident in the pages of *Kantipur* – makes him one of the best reporter-cultural analysts of my generation. Venturing to write in English here, Wagle provides an interesting profile of anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista, author of *Fatalism and Development*, among other things. Yet when Bista claims that, in helping Jumlis regain their confidence over the last three years he is implementing what he has written, it feels as though Wagle lets him off easily, preferring instead to focus on Bista’s observations about sexual behavior across different communities in Nepal. Wagle’s second contribution, a travel account to Gosainkunda, unfortunately is short on the kind of vintage-Wagle subtlety that this writer has come to expect from him.

A tête-à-tête with writer Greta Rana reveals interesting facets of her work and life in Nepal. It also reveals that associate editor, Chandani Thapa, went to this conversation without having done any homework on Rana's corpus. Clothes of the 'bold and beautiful' variety designed by Dolly Gurung, an insipid article entitled "How to be Clint [Eastwood]," and a report on the Miss Nepal '94 contest together take up ten pages. A tribute to the late artist R. N. Joshi, cameo news-items from all over the place, tips to save your job, health tidbits, recipes, and reviews fill in other pages. In "Dashain Blues" we are told "Don't give in to your wife's demands for jewellery" which suggests that this entire list of 'Attitudinal DOs and DON'Ts' was written with the unacceptable male = provider equation in mind. The layout is admirable and the production quality excellent. Except for the fashion photographs by Pradeep Yonzon, all the others appear without credits. Are we to suppose that Bikas Rauniar took them all?

This magazine is clearly targeted for a select audience among members of the "First Nepal" who are thoroughly familiar with the English language and whose worlds are made up of Nepalis noted above and other icons such as Michael Jackson, Schwarzenegger, Sunjay Dutt, Agassi, Eastwood, the Rolling Stones, Jethro Tull, and Pink Floyd. The contents that go in the production of what is claimed to be a "happy magazine" assume prior familiarity with these names and the cultural worlds they embody. For instance the tidbit "Color Trouble" – with the first word spelt without the 'u' as is customary in the US – in which computer graphics make a 'white' Jackson and a 'black' Schwarzenegger can only look not stupid if one knows something about the viciousness of racism in America. The fashion tips and suggestions for health improvement assume a lifestyle taken for granted in metropolitan US and one that increasingly seems to

appeal to those aspiring for dominant membership in the First Nepal. The magazine's contents are evidence of the fact that icons from the audio-visual entertainment industry, international sports, and the world of beauty pageants now fire the imagination of these people.

Clearly borrowing both form and substance from other "don't worry, be happy" glossies that now emanate not only from the Euro-American print-media worlds but also from India, it is unclear if and how *Attitudes* will intervene in the collective imagination of those aspiring for membership in the First Nepal. I agree with the editors when they say life needs to be celebrated. However, in trying to avoid critical appreciation of life, this magazine partakes of a strand of postmodern aesthetics that defers meaningful political engagement endlessly. The danger is that such uncritical celebration can soon become vapid in the extreme. Critical appreciation of our landscape, of celebrities at home and abroad, of people in love, and what have you, is an acceptable form of cultural analysis but descriptive narratives that simply cultivate a culture of spectatorship cannot produce a competent, happy Nepal. To be socially relevant, any celebration cannot but come to terms with our realities, the Second Nepal, if you will.

Let me just point out some examples. The excessive coverage of the stellar SLC performance of Garima Rana (yes she wants to be a lawyer and not a doctor or engineer!) that is continued in this magazine avoids a frontal confrontation with the colossal waste of human resources that is represented in the 67% annual average SLC failure rate consistently over the last 20 years. A new sensibility of sexuality increasingly dominant here continues to make women's bodies the site of both conspicuous display and lustful male gazes. Even as the pageant organizers claimed that female bodies were not what were been judged, the responses

given by contestants in Miss Nepal '94 are testimony to the fact that when it comes to investing on display of the body and the empowerment of the mind, it is the former that has received more attention from members of the First Nepal. One recalls here what one contestant said about the kind of man she would want to have (“Civilization and ...”) and how the woman who compèred the show mistranslated judge Dolly Gurung’s question to one contestant – “What are the advantages of being born Nepali?” – as “What are the advantages of being a bold Nepali?” I refuse to believe that these are results of bad acoustics. They to me represent what happens when you let imported imaginations run amok inside you, when you invest more on the pomp of the modern and not on your competence to handle it. A celebration of Miss Nepal '94 without noting these realities in our midst is misplaced.

Our country is beset with extreme forms of injustice. The resources that provided Arzu Rana and Garima Rana their educational competence are unfortunately not available to an obviously talented Binda Adhikari (‘Ujeli’ in the rightfully acclaimed telefilm by the same name). Despite the efforts of the Ujeli Help Unit to help Binda – necessarily an act to celebrate as *Attitudes* does – it is irresponsible to forget the lot of thousands of Bindas that make up our Second Nepal. Yet in removing the subject from the arena of critical discussion (because, face it, it is depressing), *Attitudes* asks us to participate in an act that fosters collective amnesia about our Second Nepal. Therefore the way in which this magazine wants to celebrate ‘love, life and you’ is in itself, to me, one depressing symptom of the malaise that has infested our First Nepal. There are miles to go, on every conceivable front, before we can begin to truly celebrate. And depressing issues should challenge us to empower our minds appropriately and not let our bodies just become the sites of various desires.

Deurali: The Other Print Media

Kathmandu-based Nepali language newspapers dominate the national print-media scene in Nepal. Since the social field in Nepal is dominated by party-based politics, one need not be surprised if the subject par excellence of these newspapers has been politics too, narrowly defined along party lines. While market sales might not justify their total investments, these newspapers sustain themselves also from the social capital that accrues to them as influential media doing the political journalism dance.

In this scenario, questions arise regarding the viability of print media forms that neither toe the political journalism line nor muster any social capital for their sustenance. What do these non-mainstream newspapers cover? Who are their readers? How do they sustain themselves financially? I shall try to answer these questions by using the example of an ‘other’ print media that I am most familiar with: *Deurali*, a weekly rural newspaper published by *Gramin Bikas Palpa* from Tansen, Palpa. Since

The Kathmandu Post, 13 June 1997; original title ‘The other print media’

having the privilege of being in Tansen when its first issue was published on 27 April 1994 I have followed its career from a distance. Veteran journalist Vinaya Kumar Kasajoo edited it for the first three years and since April 1997, this responsibility has shifted to Meghraj Sharma.

What's in it? "*Deurali* will run completely according to the interests of village people. It is a newspaper where news about villagers and discussions regarding how to improve village life will be printed." Thus ran the mission statement in *Deurali*'s first editorial. By the time its 150th issue was published on 23 May 1997 we can say that, from a production point of view, *Deurali* has been successful in fulfilling its mission.

Deurali's coverage is extensive in terms of subjects. Apart from news, four general subjects are covered well in its pages. Issues related to public health such as AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, contraceptives, rabies, eye camps, gastro enteric diseases and women's reproductive health are covered in an informative manner. The second general area can be entitled 'development' coverage in which successful and innovative features of *bikas* work related to agriculture, rural electrification, education, environment, community forestry, informal credit networks, drinking water schemes, biogas, and schools from various places are highlighted.

The third general area of coverage consists of feature articles highlighting success stories of village-based individuals who have experimented with various occupations, farming styles and small industries. The fourth area of coverage provided by *Deurali* has concerned women and gender issues. It has not only featured the stories of women who are successfully engaged in income-generating occupations outside their homes, but it has also covered women's activism on various issues. These have included their campaigns against alcohol, and for legal rights on various issues.

While ‘national’ newspapers also cover the topics covered in Deurali, two things distinguish the former. First is the village-centric approach to reporting. Hence we get local details that are hard to find elsewhere. The second distinction is its style of writing that makes its contents accessible to anyone who can read the Nepali language.

Who’s reading it? *Deurali* has a weekly circulation of about 1200 copies in about 50 districts of Nepal. Letters-to-the-editor indicate that *Deurali*’s most dedicated readers come from the districts of Palpa, Syangja, Gulmi, Baglung, Arghakhanchi, Rupendehi, and Nawalparasi. Bulk distributions by I/NGOs working in the field of adult literacy have also dispersed this newspaper to various regions of Nepal.

To extend the set of its readers and the areas about which news is printed in this paper, *Deurali* has promoted the idea of readers’ clubs whereby reading groups are sent a free copy of *Deurali*. In return each group has to send at least one newsreport to the paper every month. According to editor Sharma, *Deurali* currently has 152 such clubs (in more than 30 districts of Nepal) out of which about 100 are very active. Although most of them are located in the west and central west regions, some such groups exist in Dhankuta in the east and Bardiya in the west.

Without more research into its geography of distribution, it is hard to be very specific about just who has been reading *Deurali*. Apart from members of the readers’ groups, it is most plausible that neo-literates, school students, teachers, businesspeople, NGO personnel, and women activists constitute the bulk of its readers. The fact that *Deurali*’s specialty coverage is appreciated by its hardcore readers can be deduced from many letters-to-the-editor, one of whom described it thus: “No speech of the leaders, no [false] promises of the ministers. Just the subjects of genuine villagers, their stories and their suffering. Their photos and their language.”

Apart from functioning as an informative, consciousness-raising forum, it can be said without doubt that *Deurali* has given birth to new communities of readers who are testimony to important and vital changes taking place in Nepali society through the field of communication.

What's its financial viability? *Deurali* was initially supported by a grant from the Asia Foundation. The money thus received was used to buy necessary hardware for printing. A USAID grant helped its production subsequently. Profit made from the use of the press for other printing jobs was supposed to be used to support the paper.

When *Deurali* entered the third year of its publication in late April 1996, outside financial support ended. At that point the price of the paper was raised to rupees five from rupees two. This price does not cover the average cost of production of each copy that Sharma puts at rupees twelve. The presence of other offset printing presses in Tansen, Butwal and Pokhara has meant that the press does not get enough other printing jobs to actually subsidize the production of *Deurali* as originally estimated.

Hence if the market is the yardstick by which we should judge the viability of *Deurali*, then it is a losing proposition. Going by the experience of the past three years, the editorial team does not expect a huge growth in returns from subscriptions and sales. In the past some staff members have worked without pay or at half-pay but editor Sharma added that it was not possible to continue to expect such sacrifice from them. Without outside support, he stated that *Deurali*'s publication would have to be stopped soon.

For 'donor' Support: According to Sharma, the annual support needed by *Deurali* with a 10-member production staff is about three lakh rupees. It is clear that our rural economy cannot, by itself, support such endeavors for some years to come.

Since Nepali political and financial urban-based elites have done close to zero work when it comes to the establishment of endowments to support such rural-based activities, the necessary money to support them will continue to have to come from foreign donors for some years into the future.

While sustainability has been a pet theme within the *bikas* world in recent years, there has been little differentiated analysis of what projects or works should be expected to pay for themselves in the short-term and what should receive a relatively long-term support. *Bikase* money flowing into Nepal today signifies that the country itself is NOT market sustainable even after about 50 years of foreign aid. Hence to expect a rural newspaper like *Deurali* to pay for itself within the first three years of its existence is outright unfair.

If one considers the fact that the cost for a donor-supported single three-day seminar in one of Kathmandu's hotels (encompassing at most a few hundred of Nepal's elites) could match the annual support sought by *Deurali* and if it is important to bring about a slow revolution that will ensure that each rural-based *Deurali*-reading Nepali is as equal as a Kathmandu-based smooth operator, then *Deurali* and similar projects need further support from the donors. This is not an argument for eternal support for Nepali endeavors in non-mainstream media. Instead it is a call for those with *bikas* money to wake up to the fact that unless such endeavors are supported in the medium-run of about 10 years or more, they are bound to die. And when that happens it will have been proved that short-term disbursement priorities and prestige portfolios of support are still the ways through which donors ensure their own sustainability, despite the *bikas* rhetoric of the year being 'people's empowerment' and 'strengthening democracy through the media.'

Regional Print Media

In one previous essay I argued that Kathmandu's monopoly in Nepali media must be broken. As is generally known, almost all of the nationally influential print and electronic media in Nepal is produced in Kathmandu. This kind of spatial concentration means that the Nepali media represents the Kathmandu establishment's point of view on almost all issues. I then argued that despite slight differences in political orientation and analytic capacity, there is a consensus on how the Kathmandu media reports its subjects. It does so, it seems to me, by playing it safe between the various political, financial and intellectual/cultural elite camps. This state of affairs, I also argued then, should be a cause of alarm to anyone who is interested in generating the conditions in which a diversity of orientations and points of view (both intellectual and spatial) can be served by a truly pluralistic and democratic media in Nepal.

It then seemed to me that in order to break Kathmandu's hold in nationally significant media production, print and electronic

The Kathmandu Post, 15 March 2002; original title 'Regional print media: enhancing capacity'

(especially radio) media institutions located outside of Kathmandu must consolidate themselves by innovating new models of ownership and management. I then argued that media managers and editors need to think carefully of ways to improve the skills of their reporters and other relevant staff members so that their coverage of regional issues would become much better. If that were to happen in the case of print media, one hoped that the circulation numbers of regional newspapers would go up. With this increased visibility, revenue from advertisements would also go up, enhancing the financial health of print institutions. For the case of non-state sector radio stations that were coming up in different parts of the country, it was then felt (and it still is the case today) that it was too early to say much about them analytically because they were yet to prove their presence effectively.

Since the publication of that piece, I have had the opportunity to design and direct a research project on regional media in Nepal. The book that has been generated from this research – *Ksetriya Media* - was published in April 2002. To facilitate the production of social knowledge on the history of regional media, we asked several former or practicing journalists to pen down a short history of media in the parts of the country where they had worked. Eight such people responded to us with significant articles that form the first set of contributions in the above-mentioned book. The second set of contributions came from researchers associated with Martin Chautari and the Centre for Social Research and Development. Bhaskar Gautam did research in the Eastern Development Region, Devraj Humagain in the Central, Shekhar Parajulee in the Western and Krishna Adhikari in the Mid- and Far-Western Regions. Here is what their research suggests.

With respect to investment in regional media, the volume has gone up, both for the case of print and radio. There have been

attempts to consolidate investments in various existing newspapers by forging an alliance between several publishers who have chosen to back up only one of the erstwhile publications. Investment in non-state sector radio is of course all new. In addition new investors with no or very little background in media production have entered the field. Apart from the private sector, investment in media has also been forthcoming from local governments who run radio stations. Such investments have also come from non-governmental organizations and cooperatives that run radio stations and publish newspapers. In this way, one could argue that the democratic logic of wider participation in media is happening in Nepal. However our researchers have also noted that there is a big gap between the rhetoric of what media producers and managers say they want to achieve (serve the larger public good through good journalism) and their institutional capacities. This gap became apparent when the researchers paid attention to some other variables that are important determinants of the quality and influence of media products.

The average circulation of regional newspapers was found to be less than 1000 copies with their geographical spread mostly limited to the cities in which they were published. Even for the case of the better newspapers in Butwal or Pokhara, the circulation figures increased to 7000 or above but their space of circulation was rather limited. Hence regional print media product's visibility is not so attractive to a potential advertisement patron who would rather place his ad in a Kathmandu newspaper. This leads to severe undercutting of ad rates amongst regional newspapers, resulting in poor revenue returns that do not sustain the long-term health of the concerned newspapers. This in turn forces editors and managers to engage in ad gimmicks during particular seasons of the year (say, for instance, during Dasain or Nepali new year). Income from such gimmicks counterbalance

the losses sustained during the rest of the year. In Eastern Nepal, the beginning of the production of regional editions of two Kathmandu dailies has made the ad market more difficult for local newspapers. The entry of radio stations has similarly made life more challenging for print products in cities like Pokhara and Hetuanda. To further complicate matters, the government's ad policies and the Press Council Nepal's bases for the classification of newspapers are also not too conducive toward the financial health of regional newspapers.

Our researchers found out that new people were being attracted to media but most who are joining the profession have only the equivalent of a 10+2 pass formal education. Members from the variously marginalized groups were still not present in media institutions in any promising numbers. While there are frequent opportunities in places like Biratnagar or Nepalgunj to participate in short-term trainings, longer-term opportunities for formal or informal trainings do not exist for journalists located in most parts of Nepal. Even a city of the size and wealth of Pokhara does not host a single long-term program in journalism training. Organizations in Kathmandu that provide fellowships for investigative or other kinds of reporting have rarely awarded them to journalists based outside of Kathmandu. Journalist organizations do not have any goal-oriented programming to address what seems to be a sorry state of affairs, and some journalists themselves have often participated in shady deals.

Regional media is caught in a vicious cycle of low visibility, low revenue, poorly trained reporters, and poor quality content. What this means is that regional media institutions and products are rarely able to perform their function (assigned to them in media theory) as watchdog institutions. While there is a sign or two of hope, most of what our researchers found does not point toward a hopeful future for regional print media in Nepal.

NGOs in Print Production

Mainstream media debates about the life of NGOs in Nepal almost always happen in polemical or accusatory tones. Media write-ups on the subject, more often than not, are bereft of good research and ethnographic content. The repetitious nature of such writings in the mainstream press indicates that Nepali media falls easy prey to routine and unimaginative production sequences. To try to change the characteristic of our media debates on the life of NGOs in Nepal, I would like to suggest that the mainstream media take a closer look at NGO work with more probing eyes. Any sector of work in which Nepali NGOs are involved could be chosen for this purpose. Here I want to highlight the participation of NGOs in the production of print media contents in Nepal. I do so by referring to three studies published by my colleagues from Martin Chautari in 2003.

The first of them deals with the life of magazines produced by NGOs in post-1990 Nepal. This theme has been researched

Nation Weekly, 5 December 2004; original title 'A Closer Look'

by Purna Basnet who is himself the former editor of the magazine *Bikas* produced by the NGO Atmanirbhar Bikas Manch (ABM). Basnet looks at the life of four magazines produced by Nepali NGOs: *Himal*, *Asmita*, *Bikas*, and *Haka Haki*. The first three have ceased publication as NGO entities and *Haka Haki* has resumed regular publication after a hiatus of almost a year. These magazines were produced by Himal Association, Asmita Mahila Prakashan Griha, ABM and the Centre for Development Communication and Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (jointly) respectively. After carefully describing the publication trajectories of these four magazines Basnet concludes that they have contributed significantly to the genre of responsible and thoughtful journalism in Nepal. These magazines contributed to the widening of the domain of Nepali journalism in terms of its subject matters. According to Basnet, they also contributed to the making of a critical genre of journalistic writing and showed how the Nepali language could be used to discuss and analyze complex social issues facing Nepali society.

The second study deals with the work of the Centre for Investigative Journalism (CIJ). It was written by Komal Bhatta who had earlier published an excellent article on the life of evening newspapers produced in Kathmandu. CIJ provides fellowships to journalists to do in-depth and investigative stories on different subjects including corruption. According to Bhatta, by early 2003, more than 50 journalists had done about 60 stories under CIJ fellowships, most of which have been published in various mainstream Nepali language publications. Until that time CIJ had also prepared and published five books and this number has increased since Bhatta did his research. Two of these books are handbooks regarding how to do investigative journalism including one in the sub-field of reporting the judiciary and the other three books are compilations of investigative writings commissioned by

the Centre. These three books provide useful examples of some of the best investigative pieces produced by Nepali print journalists.

What has been the contribution of CIJ to Nepali journalism? Bhatta answers this question by looking at both what the published stories of CIJ have succeeded in doing and at the enhancement of skills of journalists who have worked under CIJ fellowships. On the first point, he notes two kinds of successes. One – and the relatively more successful aspect – is simply the extension of the domain of the journalistic field and by implication the sphere of public debates in Nepal. A good example of this would be journalist Sangeeta Lama's long exposé of how gifts offered to Lord Pashupatinath (both cash and kind) were not accruing to the public accounts of any properly constituted institution but were being used by the Mul Bhatta of the temple who held absolute control over such offerings. In an article published in *Himal* bi-monthly in 1997, Lama argued that the Mul Bhatta and his associates had earned many *crores* of rupees whereas the money could have been used to do many necessary repairs in the temple complex. The status quo of funds management at Pashupati has not changed due to this article in the seven years since it was published but its details and arguments have given birth to many other articles on the same subject in the Nepali press. The subject, erstwhile considered outside of the domain of public scrutiny has now been brought under the journalistic gaze.

Same could be said of Shiva Gaunle's and Hari Thapa's reporting on various aspects of the judiciary in Nepal. More recently, after the imposition of emergency in the country in late 2001, Mohan Mainali's story on the workers of Dhading who had been killed by the state's security forces in an airport construction site in Kalikot – their only crime was that the security forces considered them to be Maoists – showed that good investigative journalism was still possible at a time when some of the fundamental constitutional

guarantees were suspended. The second success of the CIJ stories is that, in some cases, they have managed to make Nepali society 'better' to a certain extent, although it might not be easy to quantify the magnitude of such change. Bhatta provides several examples of this by describing CIJ stories on fuel adulteration, pesticide storage, and driving licence racket and the processes of change these stories generated.

With respect to the second aspect of CIJ's contribution to Nepali journalism, Bhatta looks at the skill enhancement of the journalists who have been awarded its fellowships. Having done stories that were significantly longer than average stories in print journalism in Nepal, and more investigative in nature, and having undergone the necessary process of theme identification, research, writing, re-writing, and editing, many of the skills necessary to become a good journalist were honed in the process of executing the story fellowships. As the more than 50 journalists who have worked with CIJ fellowships carry on with their work in the field, skill enhancement of practitioners might be the most important and long-lasting contribution of CIJ to Nepali journalism.

The third study I discuss here deals with feature services produced, in the main, by NGOs. This article was researched and written by Krishna Adhikari and was published in the book *Media Utpadan ra Antarvastu* (2003, Martin Chautari) edited by Ramesh Parajuli and myself (this book also contains the two articles discussed above). Adhikari provides details about many print content providing services run by several media related and unrelated institutions. The institutions include those who want to popularize the themes they work on – for example, the science feature service of RONAST or biodiversity feature service of NEFEJ. They also include others who want to advocate particular subjects as a part of social activism – for example, the women's feature services of Sancharika Samuha or pro-dalit feature services

of Jagaran Media Centre. More than 15 feature services have been in operation in the last decade and half and about eight were in existence when Adhikari completed his research in late 2002. While most services are reliant on donor support for existence – this in part explains the short life of some feature services – Adhikari concludes that these services have filled the lacuna for a diverse range of subjects in the Nepali print media. Adhikari's research revealed that Kathmandu's weekly newspapers and newspapers produced from outside of Kathmandu published the articles from feature services in greater numbers.

To conclude, it must be recognized that NGO involvement in Nepali print media in the recent years have been anything but insignificant. The above analysis just introduces some brief details about three aspects of NGO involvement in print media contents and to be sure, there are more examples that could have been discussed here. Readers are urged to read the original three essays summarized above for further details and critical reflections on the connection between NGOs and print media production. However, even this brief introduction should be enough to suggest that the life and contributions of NGOs in Nepal deserve a more sophisticated treatment in mainstream media than has been the case thus far.