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RADIO

FM Radio and Urbanscape

We have gotten so used to a range of FM radio broadcasts in Kathmandu that we tend to forget that as late as October 1995, Radio Nepal was the only radio station that broadcast programs from within Nepal. In November 1995, Radio Nepal started FM Kathmandu (100 MHz) with its own programs. After some months, its program slots were sold to private operators and this arrangement continues to date with Classic FM.

On 18 May 1997 Radio Sagarmatha FM 102.4 became the first independent station to get a licence. It started its regular broadcast in March 1998. Then the others followed: Kantipur FM 96.1 (October 1998), Image Channel owned K.A.T.H. FM 97.9 (January 1999), Kathmandu Metropolitan City owned Metro FM 106.7 (September 1999), HBC FM 94 (September 2000). Hence residents of Kathmandu can already choose from six FM stations. Three FM stations outside of Kathmandu started broadcasting regular programs in the year 2000: cooperative

owned Radio Lumbini FM 96.8 in Manigram (near Butwal), village development committee owned Radio Madanpokhara FM 106.9 in Palpa, and the commercial Manakamana FM 92.9 in Hetaunda. Apart from Radio Madanpokhara, all the other FM stations are located in urban Nepal. What has all this radio activity added to our knowledge urbanscape?

Based just on the experience from Kathmandu we can say that first of all, FM radio has increased the amount of news available in radio to urban listeners. Since these FM stations are not supposed to broadcast their own official news bulletins (as per one of the conditions mentioned in their licence), none of the stations call their news-oriented programs “news”. In terms of content, these programs vary a lot: they include a reading of the headlines and some main news from major newspapers of the day, economic reports, sports results, and reportage about literary activities, institutional events, art exhibitions and other happenings in the society at large. By focusing mostly on the ‘non-political’, these FMs have already stretched our erstwhile definition of news.

Second, FM radio has increased the amount of what can be called “everyday life” information. This includes information about special events, traffic flows in the city, weather forecast, flight schedule, bus schedule, market prices for vegetables and fruits, air pollution readings, health tips and horoscopes (for those who believe in them). In addition FM radio has provided ‘live’ information about events such as elections, religious gatherings, and national celebrations.

Third, FM radio is assisting the formation of a new knowledge in our urbanscape. This is being done through programs designed to cater to various curiosities – about contraceptives and careers, music and movies, stage and sports, language and literature, health and hobbies and so on. Some of this urban new knowledge is executed through ‘quiz’ formats, while others come in the form

of chat programs and musicals. Some of this new knowledge is superfluous but it being on air is a kind of knowledge democratization at work. Music production has received a shot in the arm due to FM radio (this needs a separate essay!).

Fourth, FM radio has increased the amount of social analysis available in radio through various programming formats. In the form of a monologue it has come as anonymous or attributed response from persons walking on the streets (“vox pop” in radio parlance) or as commentary from noted social critics such as Rhituraj, Chatyang Master, D. P. Bhandari and Kishor Nepal (alas, they are all male!). As a dialogue, such social analysis has come in the form of one-to-one interviews between the host and her guest, or in the form of multiple dialogues between the host(s), guests and listeners who call in by phone (e.g. “Dabali”). Frequently, others have participated in such discussions by sending in their queries by mail, fax or email before the programs go on air. Such analysis can also be found in feature reportage focused on a specific theme as innovated by the early team of “Hamro Khaldo” in Radio Sagarmatha. Some of the subjects covered by these programs have never been discussed over radio before, and others have received critical treatment impossible to find in Radio Nepal. This kind of analysis is being done in Nepali and Nepal Bhasa already and will emerge in other languages as the FM revolution spreads across Nepal.

Fifth, FM radio’s interactions with government officials and politicians have added to the collective knowledge of urbanites regarding (mis) governance in our society. Similarly discussions with practitioners of other professions have demystified specialist knowledge, intellectually empowering the community of listeners.

Sixth, FM radio has increased the amount of oral history available in the radio. This has been achieved through programs that present the life history of a ‘big’ person in his own voice

(“Mero Katha”) or through a profile of a ‘subaltern’ made by a reporter. Alternatively, personal history often related to love tragedies (but occasional successful romances) has become very popular in the form of letters to host Kalyan Gautam (‘Dear Kalyan’ is how these letters begin in “Mero Katha, Mero Git”). Interviews by Bhairab Risal with older folks in “Uhile Bajeka Palama” are also of this genre.

Seventh, FM radio programs have encouraged cross-media reference as a routine practice of urban knowledge. While newspaper contents have been read over FM radio, programs aired have influenced the print media as well. For example, since FM reports highlight local sports events, broadsheet dailies have had to follow through by increasing their coverage of local sports. Additionally radio program hosts are bringing Internet content to listeners who do not have direct access to the net and more radio programs are increasingly becoming available in the Internet.

These seven points hardly exhaust the new knowledge urbanscape FM radio has helped to generate. But my intention is not to be exhaustive. Rather it is to argue that we have not made any serious effort to understand how FM radio is contributing to a new kind of urban public sphere in our society. Our commentary on FM has been a boring reiteration of how it will “destroy our culture”. It is a good indicator of how we are, intellectually speaking, unprepared to analyze the fast changes occurring in our society.

FM Radio and New Urban Communities

In this essay I highlight FM radio communities and discuss their significance for the new urban public sphere. Why highlight these communities some of which are imagined at best? What have they got to do with the new contours of our urban life? As will be clear from the examples discussed below, FM radio is not only what goes on air. It is as much what happens off air. If the programmes aired are engendering a new public sphere, then the communities that produce them and the communities, in turn, produced by them are important elements of that sphere. The skills, intentions and desires of these communities define for us some of the broad contours of our own experience of our cities.

First in the list of real communities is FM owning institutions. While Radio Sagarmatha is owned by a NGO, commercial companies own Kantipur FM, K.A.T.H. FM, HBC FM, Hits FM, and Manakamana FM (in Hetaunda). Locally elected government bodies own Metro FM in Kathmandu and Radio

Madanpokhara in Palpa. Radio Lumbini is owned by a cooperative. Companies, cooperatives, local governments and NGOs are real institutional communities that have taken up the new challenge of managing a FM station (this variety in ownership is an important indication of the pluralism possible in radio in Nepal). The stations might not have all the skills necessary for optimum operation but they are certainly learning on air. Off-air they have even tried promotionals such as blood drives, child health camps, music awards and anti-pollution campaigns to bolster their on-air image.

The group of program producers who either work as freelancers or are employed by various FM stations comprises the second real community. When talk about establishing FM radio stations began some seven years ago, many wondered where the people who would run these stations would be found. That worry was genuine but exaggerated. After all, we have found the people – program producers, technical experts, reporters, talk show hosts, and music jockeys – indigenously, however inadequate their present skills might be. Apart from individual producers, we also now have institutional program producers. For instance, Communication Corner headed by Gopal Guragain in Kathmandu currently produces a half-hour program called “Kayakairan” that is simultaneously broadcast over the three FM radio stations in Madanpokhara, Manigram (near Butwal) and Hetaunda, three times a week. Its aim is “to bring listeners from outside the Valley emotionally close to the center by providing them up-dates on happenings in Kathmandu.”

The third real community comprises of a different type of producers – lyricists, musicians, singers and others related to the music industry. They have benefited from the FM boom, as there are now more outlets for their creations. Equally the stations can choose from a larger pool of talent.

The fourth real community comprises of a few FM activists. The Community Radio Support Centre (headed by Raghu Mainali) of Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ) provides support to any institution interested in opening a community radio station. The Centre will do feasibility studies for them and give hands-on training to program producers. Communication Corner, the Centre for Development Communication, Nepal Press Institute and some other organizations have done research on different aspects of FM and have produced some useful manuals.

FM radio has also given birth to new imagined or transient communities whose own importance can not be underestimated. Constituents of these imagined communities come in two forms. First are news communities: people and institutions that are interested in having news about their activities broadcast over radio and people who listen to such broadcasts. In examining my incomplete records, I was surprised to find just how many members of this community sent news of various happening to Radio Sagarmatha's *Halchal* programme during Srawan/Bhadra 2056 B.S.

The second imagined community consists of listeners of specific programmes. Think about the dedicated fan of Upendra Aryal's "Bihani Yatra" or Kalyan Gautam's "Mero Katha, Mero Geet". He is by himself. But he knows that, at that very moment, there are many others listening to the same program. He will never meet most of them, yet he will feel like he is one with them – an imagined community of the sort that has been made famous in social science parlance by Benedict Anderson. FM radio has created many such imagined communities of fans of particular stations, specific programmes or their hosts.

At times a letter of praise or complaint against the host for being partial toward other members of the imagined community

breaches the anonymity, but it is never seriously done. On other occasions, such imagined communities become a bit more real when, for instance, some FM fans went to Sundarijal for a picnic to celebrate the New Year 2000, or fans of Prakash Sayami's programme on 'eternal' Nepali songs met to discuss their common interest. Faces were put to known voices heard over the airwaves but the community was a transient one at best. The fans soon returned to living their own individual friendships with FM. As critic CK Lal described it nearly three years ago, FM is a good friend to have in the city when families consist of atomized individuals.

Management, production, training, researches, publication and support skills that have been developed in the context of FM radio are important assets not only for the field of media but also for urban life and Nepali society at large. Many of these skills have been transferred from other professions and they in turn will be passed on to other trades. Whatever might be their trajectories, the communities that possess them are real and they are here to stay. The imagined communities are also no less important for without them the circuit of FM broadcast will not be complete. The future of our collective urban imagination is richer by their presence whatever the politics of taste for FM programmes might be.

Independent News in FM Radio

When non-state sector FM radio began in Nepal in 1997 a compromise of sorts was in place between the Nepal government and the licence holders of radio stations. While issuing broadcast licences, the government assigned extra conditionalities that barred these independent radio stations to broadcast their own news. The first independent station to go on air, Radio Sagarmatha, and the other stations that followed its example, accepted these terms because they first wanted to get hold of their broadcast licences before dealing with these extra difficulties.

Once they went on air, these stations did broadcast news under other names while refusing to invest full scale on an independent news desk citing governmental restrictions. Their justification was not baseless as the government, from time to time, issued 'directives' reminding these stations that they were not authorized to broadcast news that they had processed from their own sources. Guided by the mentality of the pre-1990

Panchayat days (when the state held complete monopoly over both radio and television), the State wanted to maintain a tight control over what independent broadcasters were putting out for public consumption.

One set of such directives was issued in January 2001 by the Nepal government to 10 independent radio stations and the FM radio station owned by its own Radio Broadcast Service Development Committee (FM 100). This directive contained four points, the first three of which are relevant to this discussion.

First, the government specified that the Board running the radio station should consist of at most three people, one of whom would be a representative of the Ministry of Information and Communication. The Board, coordinated by the chair of the licence holding institution could not hold a meeting without the presence of the representative of the Ministry and any program not approved by this representative could not be aired. In addition details of the programs approved by the Board should be submitted to the Ministry a week in advance and the Ministry can stop the broadcast of any programs that it considered 'unfit.'

Second, the government directive specified that as far as the permission to broadcast informative programs as mentioned in the individual broadcast licences were concerned, only programs that fit the following remit would be considered informative and only such programs could be broadcast: Programs that broadcast information with development-oriented, production-oriented and public utility value in the fields of education, health, agriculture, industry, commerce, tourism, technology, family planning, forest, and science and environment as well as programs that help develop skills, generate self-employment and enhance the productivity of the nation.

Third, the government directive specified that while broadcasting information about important national or international

events and happenings, the independent radio stations could not do so based on news it had collected from its own sources. However such stations could broadcast news obtained from official HMG sources or from broadcast media owned by the government. While broadcasting second hand information (received from other media sources), the independent radio stations will have to verify its truthfulness and broadcast them by remaining within the acceptable code of conduct.

This directive was challenged in the Supreme Court (SC) of Nepal by Madhav Kumar Basnet and Sudip Paudyal. In a writ petition filed by these two lawyers, they demanded a cancellation of the government directive claiming that its first three points violated their constitutional guarantee regarding right to information and their freedom of thought and expression. In delivering the most important judgment regarding the operation of independent radio stations in Nepal, the SC ruled on 26 July 2001 that the government's directive was unconstitutional and hence repelled it.

Regarding the first point in the directive, the SC ruled that as far the Board's meeting and decision procedure were concerned, the Ministry representative could not hold a veto power as that would be going against the universal norms of majority-decision making that is effective in such institutions. SC further ruled that the Ministry representative or the Ministry itself could not arbitrarily prevent the broadcast of any programs. The only way this could be done, the SC emphasized in its decision, was through recourse to the National Broadcast Act, 2049 v.s. Section 7 of this Act has given the power to the government to issue a notice in the National Gazette preventing the broadcast of programs related to a specific event, theme or region for at most six months if this serves national interest.

Regarding the second point in the directive, the SC again resorted to the National Broadcast Act whose section 11 explicitly

states the priorities that broadcast institutions should give to programs that highlight important events and activities in the national and international spheres as well as other themes. The SC ruled that the second directive prevented the broadcast of programs in many themes listed in Section 11 of the Act. By constraining the terrain of programs that could be broadcast over FM radio, the SC ruled that this directive delimited the freedom of thought and expression and the right to information of the Nepali citizens arbitrarily beyond what was legally permissible.

Regarding the third point in the directive, the SC interpreted it as a move to create a state monopoly in the gathering and broadcast of news. The SC ruled that such monopoly eventually restricts citizens' right to information about matters of public importance in an independent and impartial manner and the freedom of thought and expression. The SC further ruled that this directive was against the objective mentioned in the preamble to the National Broadcast Act, which states, among other things, that the Act has been promulgated to further protect and promote the constitutional right to information and the freedom of thought and expression of the Nepali citizens through the use of modern technology (such as FM broadcasting).

Hence the SC ruled that the three points in the said governmental directive arbitrarily restricted the constitutionally guaranteed right to information and the freedom of thought and expression. It thus repelled them.

While the freedom of the print media had been explicitly recognized by Article 13 of the 1990 Constitution of Nepal, the status of broadcast media on the same issue had been left unspecified in the Constitution. This decision by SC, evoking both Article 12 2(a) – freedom of thought and expression – and Article 16 – right to information – of the Constitution, made up for that inadequacy. In essence, broadcast media were assured

the same freedoms as those available to print media through this decision.

This means that Nepal's independent FM stations can no longer use illegal governmental directives as an excuse to not invest in a full-scale news desk that is capable of producing independent and good radio news programs.

Are the radio station owners listening?

Public Radio and Societal Engagement

The news that by mid-February 2000, a FM radio station in the larger Butwal area would start its test broadcasting points to the fact that we have reached an interesting juncture in the history of radio in Nepal. As is well known, Radio Nepal's monopoly in that medium was broken inside the Kathmandu Valley some years ago with the start of independent FM stations. Now FM radio growth, somewhat already saturated inside the Valley, will take place outside of Kathmandu.

Apart from Butwal, we can expect stations to come up in the greater Palpa area, Pokhara, Narayanghat, Dang, Biratnagar, and other places in the next 2-3 years. Hence it is appropriate to dwell a bit on if and how FM stations could become "public radio". Equally important would be to consider how various social groups might want to engage with this medium to ensure that it serves the larger needs of the Nepali public.

The growth of the private sector media, especially print and radio must be celebrated as one of the more noticeable achievements of post-1990 Nepal. However much this growth might have added to the watchdog capacities of the media in Nepal, the private sector media's need to watch its financial bottom line as its own measure of success means that the importance of public-service broadcasting has not diminished despite the growth of commercial FM stations. If anything, the need for public radio has increased in our context. But what is a public radio?

In the US, public radio is distinguished from community radio by the fact that the former is run by professional journalists whereas the latter is run by members of the community in the primary broadcasting area of the station. The US, of course, has a much longer history of FM radio (in January 2000 its Federal Communications Commission approved a scheme to licence "micro" radio stations which are described as "small, low-power outlets that can be heard for a radius of four to seven miles"). In our own context where specialization in the radio profession is at its infancy, we need not make such a strict distinction. We can simply define public radio as a medium run by journalists, other professionals and common people, one that is committed not to the bottomline of the owners but to social justice, defined somewhat broadly.

Among the FM stations currently in operation in Kathmandu, Radio Sagarmatha (RS) is one station that fits this bill. Having worked for that station, I would like to use it as an example to answer how capable our FM stations might be to serve as public radio? We can look at the performance capability of the journalists, other professionals and common folks. Radio journalists, it seems to me, share the same level of innate capabilities and limitations with journalists working in print media. They are very good at social reporting but when it comes to breaking news or current

affairs, they depend too much on what the print media has covered. This derivative approach might exist because of institutional and financial constraints but these have to be overcome if radio is to establish a separate and more influential identity as a public watchdog institution.

The capability of the common public and its own engagement with radio leaves a lot to be desired. Too pleased to hear their own voice through inane phone conversations or considering radio as only good for entertainment, common individuals are yet to figure out how to make radio serve the larger good of the public. The case of other professionals is not very different. Treating all media and media people with disdain is one of the main characteristics of this class of Nepalis. Not counting a few exceptions, Nepali professionals have shown very little desire or capacity to engage with radio to converse with the larger public amount their own subjects. When given such an opportunity, they are more likely to engage in pedantic talk than to convey their knowledge of their own subjects in an idiom attractive enough to non-specialists. A culture of participating in program production still remains an alien concept for many of our professionals.

Equally important is the issue about how various types of social activists, engaged in a competition to impress their own views of social justice upon the larger public, might gain access to and engagement with public broadcasting. The statistics regarding the presence of women, dalits and *janajatis* (as producers or sources of news) in our radio is so abysmal that those concerned about social justice might begin their work by impressing upon the management of radio stations that the status quo does not reflect the diversity of Nepali society. These activists might want to repeatedly remind program producers and hosts about this absence and might want to even prepare a roster of individuals that they can call upon for news or radio discussions.

I am sure there are other creative ways to introduce the various agendas of social movements in Nepal in public radio but for that to happen, a discussion about their need and related issues must take place now.

With respect to public radio, our own bottom line is this: unless the capacities of radio journalists are greatly increased, and the modality of engagement with radio as a medium on the part of common folks, professionals, and social activists changes, we can not expect our non-commercial FM radio stations to really serve the interests of the Nepali public.

Radio and Our Literary Landscapes

Since 1999 (perhaps from earlier), many seminars and discussions have been held in our country on the subject of electronic media during the 21st century and its impact on our languages and literatures. Some of the arguments made on such occasions by various commentators have found their way to the op-ed or literary pages of our print media or have been discussed in radio and television programs. While a detailed historical analysis of the relationship between electronic media and our literatures remains to be done, Tanka Upreti has provided a useful account of the presence of Nepali language literature in radio and television in the literary magazine *Madhuparka* (Pus 2057 v.s. issue). This debate needs further participation and this essay is an effort in that direction.

Every time I hear the expression “electronic media during the 21st century”, my mind rushes to construct a personal history of

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communication oriented technology for the past 15-16 years. When I became a first-year college student at Brandeis University in the suburb of Boston in northeastern USA in August 1984, I could not make a direct phone call to Kathmandu. The infrastructure necessary for such communication was not yet there and operator-assisted calls were notoriously expensive. Direct calls became available only a couple of years later (if my memory serves me right). In 1984, personal computers were available in the US market but they were very expensive. In the dormitory where I lived (consisting of a four-building set), no more than five students (among more than a hundred) owned such pcs. Computer clusters for use by students for word processing and other purposes were established in Brandeis only in fall 1985.

I spent the summer break of 1985 near Stanford University in California. Family friends with whom I was living were very busy negotiating a business deal with a party in Canada. When I asked them how the documents that defined the deal were being sent back and forth, they told me about the existence of a “long-distance xerox machine”. They further added that the machine was not yet a regular gadget in corporate offices but would be so soon. Fax machines began to emerge as an important addition to office supporting paraphernalia in the US a year or so later. In 1988 - when I moved to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia - fax machines were still a new commodity. I recall seeing a big sign on the glass door of the xerox centre located at the bottom of the graduate student tower in which I lived: “We can fax: \$3”. In early 1992 I left the US to begin my doctoral research in this part of the world. Until then, I had heard of email but had never used it. By the time I returned to the US in late 1993, email and the Internet were already becoming common in the university environment. The rest, as they say, is history.

I recall this personal history of communication-oriented technology to make a simple point. The Internet linked communication environment in which many of us now work was unthinkable even 15 years ago. This pace of change in technology and its widespread adoption during such a short period of time suggests that to talk about electronic media for the entire 21st century would be a futile exercise. We can hardly predict the electronic media environment for the year 2020. Hence it is best to simply confine our discussions to the electronic media that we are already familiar with - satellite television, radio (especially FM) and the Internet *as they exist now*.

How such existing electronic media will influence our languages and literatures must then be assessed on the basis of our collective experiences. As Upreti has written, there is now a large corpus of literary programs broadcast over Radio Nepal and Nepal Television. Hence this archive and the associated experiences of program producers, participants, and listeners/viewers must be the subject of a full-fledged research project if we want to have an informed debate about the subject.

At a personal level, I find my experience with FM radio instructive to come up with an opinion on this matter. FM radio stations have been accused of distorting the Nepali language and contrary to what Upreti has written, not really doing much to promote Nepali literatures. As someone who produced a Nepali-language talk show for Radio Sagarmatha for over 20 months, I do not agree with these accusations. I feel they are greatly exaggerated. A more constructive attitude would again call for a relatively balanced assessment of the influence of FM on our languages and literatures. The successful program of Kalyan Gautam (“Mero Katha Mero Git”) in Hits FM and Prakash Sayami’s *bhabak* following for old Nepali songs in Radio Sagarmatha are but two examples that prove my point.

For the case of Nepal Bhasa (Newari), FM programming has been a shot in the arm. Journalist Basanta Maharjan's research has shown that the availability of FM radio has boosted Nepal Bhasa cultural production - music, talk discourses, etc. – in very hopeful ways. These programs - now available in almost all of the FM stations in Kathmandu – have given a complete new meaning to a language movement that was otherwise dominated by ossified minds.

If the debate on the relationship between electronic media and our languages and literatures is to be a productive one, attention must also shift to the nature of individuals and institutions who are tackling the new media in innovative and challenging manner. It is interesting to note that not many of them come with a previous reputation to defend. Individuals and institutions that have not yet made a name for themselves in these fields are more likely to set the tenure of programs for our own electronic media. Instead of viewing satellite tv, FM radio, and the internet as an invasion of “our culture”, energy must be invested to produce individuals and institutions that can face the challenges posed by these new media to cultivate our languages and literatures.

Discussing Books over Radio

In 1998, I wrote an essay that discussed book reviews as one important post-publication activity to engender a culture of reading in our society. In concluding that essay I had written “Those who are concerned about the social lives of books in Nepal and about the publishing industry in general ought to challenge the publishers and editors to give more space for reviews and discussions about books in their media. For the case of print, editorial acknowledgement of this lacuna needs to go beyond lipservice. For the case of radio and TV, new programs (as virtually none exist) that focus on books need to be produced.” Since writing that essay, experience gained through running discussions over Radio Sagarmatha on subjects related to books has convinced me that radio is a more effective medium than print for the promotion of books in Nepal for reasons discussed below.

Since May 1998, I have primarily run two types of programs about the world of books. The first type has included those

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discussions related to general themes pertinent to the world of publishing, writing and reading. Topics covered include: the status of the publishing industry in Nepal, bottlenecks that are stunting its growth, the inappropriateness of taxation on book imports, Nepali writing in English, women writers, translation of works on various South Asian languages, Royal Nepal Academy's role in enhancing literary production, the health of the Nepali language, literary journalism, community libraries, and what literary foundations are doing and can do to uplift literary productions in Nepal. Guests in these programs have been publishers, researchers, writers, teachers, columnists, critics, radio program host, librarians and book editors.

The second type has included discussions on new books. These books have been related to sustainable mountain tourism, basic & primary education, people with HIV/AIDS, oral history of water use, Nepal's failed development, history of the communist movement in Nepal, and a novel, *Junkiriko Sangit* based on dalit/non-dalit life in Parbat. My guests have included journalists, academics, a historian, a development analyst, a novelist and editors associated with the research, writing and editing of these various books. All of these discussions have begun by talking about the publication of the new book (under review) and the work that was entailed in its overall production. Then we have usually talked about the questions raised by the contents of the book under discussion. As far as my own satisfaction is concerned, I have been more pleased with this type of discussion than the first kind because of its relative novelty and the jest with which those who have produced a book usually talk about it.

The relatively larger reach of both FM and SW/MW transmissions (than print) and the interactive possibilities afforded by radio as a medium are the most attractive aspects of discussing books over radio. In a country where there is mass illiteracy

(more than a crore Nepalis can not read), discussing books over radio is the most efficient way of communicating the ideas they contain and contend to large masses. That a program dedicated to all kinds of books was never broadcast over Radio Nepal during the Panchayat years is understandable but not excusable. However, the non-presence of an exclusive program on books in Radio Nepal since 2046 v.s. or in any of the new FM radio stations including Radio Sagarmatha speaks volume for how non-committal we are as a society to the task of cultivating reading in general. This situation is abysmal, to say the least, and it must change right away.

The format I have adopted for book-related Dabalis, as discussed above, hardly exhaust the possibilities for such programs over radio. To begin with, we can have news bulletins on new books and other stories of the publishing world. Secondly radio program producers can follow the lead of some print publications by reading abstracts of new books. This idea could even be executed as a joint print-radio project. Thirdly we can try book readings – extracts of various lengths, sections read in a series of programs – by the authors or program hosts. A fourth idea would be to invite two to four readers (both those who have obtained the status of a ‘critic’ in our society and lay ones) and ask them to share their comments on a particular book. Such discussions (not in radio though) in which I participated as a graduate student were always enlightening regarding how differentially located readers read the same text.

A fifth idea would be to invite reviewers and authors for a discussion and let them have a go at it. A sixth idea would be to try a variation on the last one. I tried it when I invited Khagendra Sangraula to talk about his novel *Junkiriko Sangit*. I had already heard oral commentaries on his novel in two different programs (one organized at Padma Kanya Campus and the other at Martin

Chautari) and read two published reviews. Instead of inviting the commentators or the reviewers, I re-posed the questions they had raised and asked author Sangraula to respond to them. He seemed pleased enough with this format for me to think that this too is a possible model.

A seventh idea would be to invite people involved in the book industry to talk about various aspects of publishing (production, distribution, marketing, etc.). In programs over FM radio, calls placed by interested listeners to critics or authors of the book(s) under discussion would add yet another dimension. FM radio, with program production in various languages spoken in Nepal, also allows us the luxury to talk about a book written in another language in the local language of the station's primary broadcasting area. In other words, there are endless possibilities if the commitment is there.

Discussing books over radio is an idea that is long overdue. Are there any takers out there?

FM Radio as Democratic Expression

This has been said before but given the fact that the King Gyanendra's regime is bent on breaking the back of the FM radio sector in Nepal, it needs to be said once again: The growth of the FM radios in Nepal is a clear indication of democratization at work in post-Panchayat Nepali society.

It might be recalled here that the first licence to an independent FM radio station was issued only eight years ago in May 1997. That licence was given to Radio Sagarmatha. Since that moment of recognition that a radio station could be operated by a non-state owned entity in Nepal, there has been a phenomenal growth in the independent FM radio sector. By the end of 2004, 56 independent operators had been issued licenses, out of which more than 45 stations are already on air. The rest are in various stages of preparation and should go on air shortly barring unforeseen interferences by anti-democratic forces.

When all 56 stations go on air, there will be independent radio stations in more than 20 of the 75 districts of the country. More than 40 of the stations will be located outside of the Kathmandu Valley. Apart from those who already have secured their licenses, there are dozens of other institutions who have shown an interest in operating independent radios in parts of the country that do not yet have a radio station. Some of them have already filed their applications for licenses with the concerned authority while others are in various stages of scoping out the possibilities.

The spatial distribution of these stations is a clear evidence of democratization in Nepali society. From a Panchayat-era scenario of total media production concentration in Kathmandu, we now have a scene in which almost a third of the districts have a radio station of their own and that number is only going to grow provided we have a democratic environment that will facilitate that growth. This growth has been achieved primarily because of the recognition that people have the right to create broadcasting institutions that fulfill their right to information and their right to exercise their freedom of thought and expression. While the freedom of the print media had been explicitly recognized by Article 13 of the 1990 Constitution, the status of broadcast media on the same issue had been left unspecified in the Constitution. However a landmark decision made by the Supreme Court in July 2001 made up for this inadequacy. In essence, broadcast media were assured the same freedoms as those available to print media by the Supreme Court.

Apart from the growth in numbers, the ownership pattern of radio stations also reflects the post-Panchayat democratization in Nepali society. NGOs, cooperatives, locally elected bodies and private commercial companies own and manage FM radio stations with their own transmission sets. This possibility in ownership diversity was assured by the National Broadcast Act,

2049 v.s. In passing the Act to assure such diversity in ownership, the then people's representatives recognized that the people's right to information and their right to freedom of expression and thought could only be assured by a pluralistic radio ownership model that could not be monopolized by the rich and the powerful elements of society. In addition to institutions who have been given licenses to operate radio stations, there are now several NGOs and private companies (such as Communication Corner) that produce good radio programs that are then broadcast from many FM radio stations located in different parts of the country. Radio stations have also exchanged programs and broadcast them in an effort to share both production resources and facilitate their listeners' knowledge of regions and cultures beyond their primary broadcast area.

The spatial distribution of radio stations in different parts of the country, the variety in ownership pattern and the many sources of program production for broadcast over independent FM radio stations are all indisputable facts that suggest how in a democratic environment people will get together to create broadcasting institutions and programs that cater to their information and expression needs. Such an environment also provides the room for radio producers to learn from each other's experiences and provide better services to their listeners at large.

As has been often pointed out, radio is the most democratic medium, because it is cheap and can be localized. The pattern of growth of radio in Nepal is ideal for a country with so many different identities and region-specific issues. It is for this reason that radio activists in other South Asian countries look up to Nepal's achievements to argue for a more democratic radio operation environment in their own countries.

Much of what I have said here has been said before by myself and many others who have worked toward making independent

FM radios a robust constituting element of a democratic Nepali society. While there are inadequacies in the independent radio sector (as has been discussed elsewhere), its achievements constitute a slap in the face to those who make it their business to repeat the cliché that ‘nothing happened during the era of multiparty democracy.’ In repeating myself I join the many other voices of opposition against the draconian efforts to silence FM radio stations, radio journalists and program producing institutions. These efforts by anti-democratic cabals operating from known and unknown quarters have to be opposed and ultimately defeated through the ongoing movement of all who cherish the right to be able to think for oneself and who consider the existence of independent FM radio stations and program producers as an expression of that right.

What Ails Independent Radio Journalism?

If April will be remembered in Nepali history as the month in which two Jana Andolans tamed monarchical autocracy, first in 1990 and hopefully for the last time in 2006, May will be remembered as the month when the first independent FM radio station went on air.

Radio Sagarmatha FM 102.4 got its licence on 18 May 1997 and went on air four days later. Since then, there has been significant growth in the independent FM radio sector. By the end of 2004, 56 independent radio stations had been issued licenses, out of which almost 50 have already gone on air in more than 20 districts of the country. As of December 2003, almost 60 other organizations were in various stages of the application process. As we deservedly celebrate the 10th year of independent radio, it is an opportune moment to look at the record. I do so by identifying the factors that have facilitated and hindered independent radio journalism.

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The plural structure of the FM radio landscape has been brought about by legal instruments. While the freedom of the print media had been explicitly recognized by the 1990 Constitution, the status of broadcast media had been left unspecified even as the Constitution guaranteed the citizen's right to freedom of expression and information. Putting an end to state monopoly in broadcasting, the National Broadcast Act, passed thirteen years ago, envisaged the entry of multiple players in the radio landscape. FM radio stations are now owned and operated by NGOs, private companies, cooperatives, and locally elected bodies. The legal foundations of radio pluralism have been strengthened by various Supreme Court decisions since 2001.

Democratically elected governments prior to October 2002 slowed down the growth of this plural structure by making the licence application process opaque and thus costly for those without reach in the higher echelons of party and government bureaucracy. They also influenced its form by favoring city-based and commercial broadcasters over village-based and non-commercial operators.

During King Gyanendra's direct rule, attempts were made to shut down FM stations. While transmission equipment was seized from some stations, others faced continuous harassment from state officers. The opening of some stations was delayed due to objections raised by the army in the name of security. As if this was not bad enough, some FM stations were also ransacked by the Maoists. Some stations faced temporary closures. Despite these actions, the spatial distribution of radio stations and the variety in ownership pattern are the two biggest assets of our independent radio sector. From a Panchayat-era scenario of centralized radio production based in Kathmandu, we now have a scene in which almost a third of the districts have a radio station of their own and that number is only going to grow.

Unable to reverse radio's plural structure, governments have tried to influence its contents through bureaucratic means and executive orders. They have done this by sticking additional conditions while issuing licences to delimit contents that can be broadcast. They started this when issuing the first licence to Radio Sagarmatha and repeated it as a habit when issuing subsequent licences.

Among the executive orders issued by democratically elected governments, the one issued in January 2001 by a GP Koirala-led government achieved the most notoriety. In that order, the government tried to establish veto power through its representative in the proposed board overseeing each radio station and said that any program not approved by its representative could not be aired. Moreover, this directive also specified that radio stations could not broadcast news based on its own sources. When this order was challenged in the Supreme Court, in July 2001 it ruled that the government's attempt to monopolize the sources of news restricted citizens' right to information and their freedom of thought and expression. Broadcast media were assured the same freedoms as those available to print media by the Supreme Court.

But before the radio stations could take advantage of this landmark decision, the Sher Bahadur Deuba-led government imposed a state of emergency in November 2001 and placed severe restrictions were placed on FM radios. State interference in FM content reached its height during King Gyanendra's direct rule. As has been discussed at great length by journalist Binod Dhungel elsewhere, this started with the presence of security personnel in FM stations on 1 February 2005. It continued with many executive orders, the undermining of the financial viability of various radio stations through the withdrawal of government provided public service advertisements and an ordinance that revised some articles of the National Broadcast Act.

The king's regime tried its best to stop news and current affairs programs in independent radios. Some stations responded by sacking their entire news teams and others cut their staff significantly. Radio journalists were forced to take to the streets in protest while their lawyers took the fight to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court's many decisions kept independent radio alive through those dismal 15 months of direct rule by the king.

Bureaucratic non-facilitation and political interference are not the only factors that have hindered independent radio journalism in Nepal. Both commercial and non-commercial radios have not invested enough in their journalists. While many stations have increased the number of their news bulletins over the years, they have hardly recruited an appropriate number of journalists to produce them. For example, in 2005, at one leading commercial station in Pokhara, the person who headed the news section also hosted several talk shows a week and handled some phone-in entertainment-oriented programs apart from managing the station.

When I produced three talk shows a week for Radio Sagarmatha in 1998-99, I was my own producer, researcher and anchor. That situation has not changed much for talk show hosts in that station and others which have similar programs. The mentality of the management of radio stations – commercial owned or NGO owned – seems the same: increase the quantity and variety of programs broadcast with very little new investment on the producers. As a result, there is a severe lack of editorial depth even in stations that have been on air for more than seven years. This lack shows up in poor news judgment and less than probing talk shows. While radio producers know this lack first hand, station management is so feudal that those who blow the whistle publicly are likely to face expulsion.

Management problems are quite severe in non-commercial stations. For instance, Radio Sagarmatha has seen more than a

dozen station managers in its nine years of existence, a fact rarely discussed in the public. In 1999, the relationship between its management and its 'mother' organization, Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ) which owns the licence was, to put it mildly, less than friendly. In subsequent years, some station managers were hounded out of office by executive officers of NEFEJ who thought it was their job to control and not facilitate the working of Radio Sagarmatha. While the situation has improved a bit in the most recent past, insiders know that much more could be done to make the working environment better for journalists at that station. The story in other stations, I am afraid, is not very different.

Managerial mess has resulted in good journalists seeking work elsewhere. Some have gone on to work for NGOs (e.g. Antenna Foundation) and companies (e.g. Communication Corner) that produce radio programs that are broadcast from a network of FM stations. Others have abandoned careers in broadcast journalism altogether.

As we enter a new era in Nepali history, it is not only that we need to re-imagine the major political institutions of the country. For a *loktantric* Nepal to work, we need to re-imagine our intermediate institutions as well. Radio journalism is a good place to start for those who cherish a democratic media in Nepal.