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**MEDIA PERFORMANCE,
INSTITUTIONS AND
SOCIETY**

On SAARC Reporting

In this column I wish to comment on one prominent obsession of the Nepali media at the current moment: the upcoming SAARC summit and the activities going on in Nepal in its preparation.

For understandable reasons the eleventh SAARC summit scheduled to be held in Kathmandu in early January 2002 has been one of the main reporting subjects of the Nepali media over the last month. This summit should have taken place in 1999 and has been delayed for several reasons. Since our state takes particular pleasure in playing host to events with a lot of rituality associated with them, it is no surprise that our government has been big in the promotion of the upcoming summit. As a result media coverage has also been plentiful in terms of quantity. Almost all of our important media outlets have given prominent coverage to the summit, to the issues that are likely to be find space during the summit deliberations and to some of the activities being

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undertaken to spruce up the host city of Kathmandu. The quality of this coverage, however, leaves a lot to be desired.

With respect to the coverage about the summit itself and the issues that are likely to be discussed, I would say that our media has been timid at best. Apart from a report or two, our reporters have filed similar stories celebrating SAARC and the upcoming summit. Many of them have quoted individuals whose careers have benefited from SAARC junkets. Some of these people were the foreign policy ideologues of the Panchayat regime, and they still seem to harbor nostalgia for times when their views went unchallenged in the Nepali public sphere. Our reporters have failed to ask these ‘experts’ the question how summit after summit, SAARC deliberates on more or less the same issues and comes up with vapid declarations that are noteworthy only for their repetitions of the commitments by the regional heads of states to a variety of subjects with no institutional innovations promised regarding how those commitments would be honored. A rereading of the declarations made at the end of the ninth summit (Male, May 1997) and the tenth summit (Colombo, July 1998) should be adequate to make this point but I wonder how many of our journalists who have been reporting on SAARC in recent weeks have actually seen these declarations. If they have read them, then it should have naturally occurred to them how big the institutional gap is between the pomp and rituals of the SAARC summits and the ability of the regional organization to oversee that its member countries actually execute what they commit to in the summit declarations.

Examples from two fields – media and academia – that concern me are enough to show how big this disjuncture is. SAARC and unofficial SAARC processes have promoted “cooperation and understanding” in the media sector in South Asia through dozens of workshops, meetings and seminars in the

region. However, after smooth talking during such occasions, some of the most successful reporters and editors of our region go back to their newspapers and TV stations to do narrowly jingoistic stories. Nepalis have seen plenty of examples of such coverage from Indian media personnel since December 1999 (i.e., after the unfortunate hijacking of the Indian Airlines plane out of Kathmandu). The SAARC Audio-Visual Exchange Programme (SAVE) and sweet resolutions passed at South Asian media meets are testimonies to the disjuncture that characterizes feel-good South Asian “community” talk and the exigencies of the commercially dominated media institutions and markets in the region.

Similarly for the case of academia, the SAARC Chairs, Fellowships and Scholarships Scheme has been languishing for lack of interest in the academic institutions of the member countries. Programs in South Asian area studies in the region could have used this scheme but institutional lethargy on the part of SAARC and the institutions that house such programs has resulted in this scheme becoming a non-starter. This writer has elaborated on this situation elsewhere. These are but two examples but the list could be made long. SAARC and its celebrities would have us believe that the upcoming summit is of great consequence in the lives of the nations in the region. But the fact remains otherwise. Hence our reporters must ask questions of the SAARC process on grounds that the organization would much rather not discuss in public!

Finally, a comment about our style of preparing for the SAARC summit. The widening of roads and dismantling of residential and commercial structures at the Maitighar and Teen Kune junctions are taking place at war-footing to prepare Kathmandu for the summit. While it can be argued that these activities were necessary for the long-term aesthetic and practical

health of Kathmandu, executing them at such pace was hardly necessary. The way in which residents and businesses were told to vacate their premises in Maitighar and prepare the buildings for dismantling within 15 days can only be described as a draconian order. It has been suspected that such a measure was taken when the concerned citizens did not have the legal recourse (under the government announced emergency) to challenge the order in the courts. This is hardly the way in which democratic governments ought to function. The buildings might be flattened and parks might spring up in the two locations for the SAARC summit, but every flower blooming in those parks will have come up over a pool of tears of the concerned citizens who have lost much. Kathmandu's aesthetic view will have become better but its institutional capacity to democratically resolve contentious issues including the use of privately or publicly owned space will have taken a beating. Nepali media should take a better look at this trade-off.

Monitoring Research

Our media reserves some of its most cruel barbs of ridicule for our intellectuals and social science academics. Given the degree of charges leveled against intellectuals and academics, one could be forgotten for thinking that our media has in fact made some serious investigations regarding the conditions in which our intellectuals and academics supposedly fail to perform their jobs. One could also be forgotten for thinking that transparent, robust and comparative criteria have been deployed to evaluate the performance levels of our intellectuals and academics, and the media audience at large has been convincingly demonstrated the areas and degrees in which the former have been found wanting.

Sad to say, not a single such empirically informed analysis has been produced in post-1990 Nepal. Given that media reporting considers first-hand investigation of any subject the crux of its methodology, it is no small joke on the capacity of our

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media that it has found our intellectuals and academics to be severely deficient even before it has done any investigation. I grant it that a full-scale evaluation of the kind I am suggesting is not an easy task, but our media must ask itself why it has not done even a small portion of the evaluation being proposed. The season for academic promotions in our largest university, Tribhuvan University (TU), has been on for several months. I had expected that at least this process would come under close scrutiny, and even suggested the same as a story subject to some radio and print journalists. But alas, such work requires some effort. It is much easier to reiterate stereotyped conclusions and cast aspersions on our intellectuals and academics *as a group*.

The purpose of this essay is not to go into the fine distinctions between intellectuals and academics. Nor do I intend to get bogged down in definitional fine-tuning. For my purposes, intellectuals are those who speak truth to power from various locations in society and academics are those who, first and foremost, promote research and teaching in their specific disciplines. To begin with, it is necessary to do away with a confusion that is rampant in our media commentaries. Intellectuals and academics are not one and the same thing, as is often portrayed in our media. While some academics could also be intellectuals, most intellectuals are in fact not academics. Intellectuals can come from any walk of life and they need not even be literate. Moreover, some academics can assume the role of intellectuals at specific moments in their careers, and then revert back to their own professional research and teaching duties, being accountable to only their specific constituencies in their latter capacity.

That aside, the real purpose of this piece is to simply highlight the fact that our media needs to pay much closer attention to the work of social scientists, both Nepali and foreign, regarding Nepali society at large. Contrary to what might be thought, over

the last decade, a substantial corpus of social science writings on Nepal has emerged. In particular, I am thinking about the disciplines that I am most familiar with: history, anthropology, sociology, and political science. Some of these works have emanated from various wings of Nepali institutions such as TU. Others have come from initiatives taken by autonomous research centres. Still others have come as a result of undertakings by the much-maligned NGOs (another favorite target of our media). These social science writings have been published in new Nepali journals, monographs, and books. In addition to works produced by Nepalis, Indian, Japanese, British, French, German and American scholars have produced a fair amount of social science work on Nepal during the last decade. Some of their work has been published in Nepal; others have been published elsewhere but have been made available in our country. As a starting point, Nepali media needs to take note of this growth.

Secondly, it must ask which among these works have been published after substantial intellectual investments and which are results of fly-by-night operations. In other words, Nepali media must monitor the quality of social science research being produced in and about Nepal. Some academics have engaged in this kind of analysis for their specific disciplines or on specific themes of their interest. However, members of our media must also build the expertise to do the same exercise. This is important because the signposts that influence such analyses by the media can and should be different from those deployed by disciplinary academics.

Third, Nepali media must look into the process that is producing both good and poor quality social science outputs related to Nepal. It must do so to promote and encourage robust research processes and researchers and discourage shoddy work by hacks masquerading as social scientists.

Fourth, Nepali media must look into issues related to the governance of research endeavours within TU or autonomous institutions. What are the best financial and administrative practices that produce good research? How can such practices be reproduced? What should be the status of state funding for research endeavours and how might other financial sources (both private and public, within and outside of Nepal) be tapped?

Fifth, what is being done to generate a new generation of Nepali social science researchers? What kind of disciplinary teaching, discussion forums, seminars, conferences and peer reviews contribute to the making of new Nepali social science researchers?

Sixth, how might Nepali and international social scientists collaborate to produce better understandings of Nepali society and history? What have been the best practices of collaboration in our case and elsewhere, and how might we promote them?

These are some of the questions our media could pursue with respect to monitoring social science research in Nepal. There are many other questions. The point is not to list all of them but to simply highlight the fact that the entire circuit of social science production should be a significant concern to Nepali media.

Our society is experiencing social upheavals of several kinds. If we have a decent chance of understanding these upheavals and intervening on behalf of making socially just transitions, social scientists and journalists will need to work with one another with a much enhanced understanding of the conditions in which members of each tribe produce portrayals of Nepali social realities. Casting mutual aspersions will not get us too far and will be quite counterproductive.

Demonizing the Maoists?

“The Nepali media has demonized the Maoists,” argued a participant in an interaction held during the Peace Studies Course organized by the South Asia Forum for Human Rights in September 2001. This pronouncement almost coincided with the news that the Maoists had held a team of reporters representing various influential media institutions in Rolpa. Having gone to report on a meeting reportedly attended by members of the Maoist High Command, these reporters were detained in a nearby village for three days by members of the Prachanda brigade.

Has the Nepali media demonized the Maoists? It has to a certain extent and for good reasons. When the Maoists began their campaign almost six years ago, the Nepali political establishment was quick to condemn their acts (such as murder of political workers and other individuals, looting of banks, arson, etc.) while doing little in the form of serious political analysis of

The Kathmandu Post, 21 September 2001; original title ‘Media: Demonizing the Maoists?’

the demands Baburam and Co. had placed in front of the then PM Sher Bahadur Deuba. As the mainstream political bosses were unanimous in naming Maoist activities as acts of terror (while still disagreeing on the way to solve this problem), the Nepali media did the same. As is always the case in zones of conflict, our media too found it simple to report incidents of murder and other criminal activities engaged in by the Maoists. As the campaign grew and the government responded in some areas of mid-west Nepal with brutal police repression, our media, as has been noted by Deepak Thapa, could not adequately cover on-ground happenings. Instead it began to criticize several ineffective governments for allowing the Maoist problem to grow.

No matter what the objective conditions claimed for a 'revolution' might be, Nepali mainstream media consistently avoided any serious analysis of the links between socio-economic conditions and the rise of armed insurgencies in the early days of the Maoist campaign. This happened not only because of the poor state of social science research on this linkage in Nepal (this is also true for other areas in the South Asian region) but also because our mainstream media, like its counterparts elsewhere, does not believe in the sustainability of revolutions achieved under the barrel of the gun. As advocates of what the Maoists would call the *sudharvadi* (reformist) school of social change, it is no surprise that in the beginning, the Maoists were demonized by Nepali media.

But, as *Himal*'s editor Rajendra Dahal has argued in an article published in *Free Expression* dated December 2000, this type of coverage slowly gave way to a more sympathetic reporting on the Maoists for several reasons. As the campaign grew, media personnel began to be more directly affected by the violence and the simultaneous inefficacy of successive governments in power. The latter state of affairs, according to Dahal, engendered a

relatively more fatalistic attitude on the part of the media (“if the government can’t do anything to check the Maoists, why should the media take any risks?”). This feeling was compounded by explicit and implicit threats that the Maoists ideologues and cadres started to deliver to media personnel, either in direct messages or through general public utterances. Under these circumstances, our media felt safe to report on government inefficiency and appear ‘soft’ on the Maoists.

Following the Maoist attack on Dunai about a year ago, the mainstream media capitulated even further. As the morale and the recruitment drive of the Maoists increased, members of the mainstream press initiated a new genre of ‘travel reportage’ based on their Maoist sponsored visits. Except for one or two write-ups, most of these reports were very sympathetic to the Maoists (“Comrade so-and-so met us at that spot on the trail. We walked all day and were subjected to a ‘revolutionary’ cultural program all night. All the Maoist guerrillas we met were very friendly to us.”). These writings, often accompanied by photographs showing Maoist guerrillas posing with their weapons, generally failed to inform us about new developments within the Maoist movement and their immediate impact on specific localities and communities.

This type of reportage, more or less, met its end when most of the mainstream newspapers printed photographs of the Maoist-induced police carnage at Nuamoole, Dailekh in early April of this year. In particular, the photo of the wife of a policeman killed in that attack weeping over her husband’s body, taken by Chandrasekhar Karki, (*The Kathmandu Post*, 8 April 2001) made it just about impossible for the tame travel reportage to continue. Subsequently, as disruptions in Kathmandu schools by Maoist-backed students became more regular, mainstream newspapers again began to assume a more aggressive stance against the Maoists. Even if governmental confusion regarding

how it wants to tackle and negotiate the Maoist problem continues, if *pratikar* groups get their act going, it can be expected that our media will assume an even more aggressive tone against the Maoists. If this amounts to demonizing the Maoists, much of the reading public does not seem to be complaining.

The detention of journalists in Rolpa is indicative of the fact that the Maoists are scared of independent reporting. Such reporting could possibly dig up information for analyses that would challenge Maoist claims regarding what they have managed to do in the areas under their *Janasarkars*. Have schools imparted better education in Maoist territories? Do people have access to better primary health care? Are ‘cultural changes’ (such as ban on alcohol) sustainable without the fear of the gun? These are some basic questions that independent reporters could pursue. While they seem very simple, answers to these and similar questions will better inform the Nepali public about the culture of the Maoists and the capacity of their institutions beyond the barrel of the gun.

On Book Promotion

It has become something of a cliché to say that Nepal is a land of illiterates. The literature on our development as a society is replete with references to percentages of our population who can and, by inference, cannot read. While there are many conflicting views on just what percentage of our population is literate, there seems to be general agreement that about half of the Nepali population still cannot read. That, no doubt, is a major challenge for us as a society.

However, an equally daunting task is to promote books and a culture of reading amongst those Nepalis who can in fact read, that is more than a crore Nepalis (and there are more of them in India and elsewhere). Given that number, it is theoretically clear that the publishing industry related to Nepali language publications ought to be much larger in size than what it is today. I do not know about the situation amongst the Nepali-speaking Indian population, but inside Nepal, the publishers do not show much

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confidence in non-textbook items. They often point to the fact that apart from a book or two each year, most Nepali language books do not sell well and it takes years to sell a print-run of 1000 copies. Hence it is no surprise that most commercial publishers do not include non-textbook books in their publication roster.

There is much that needs to be done to improve the status quo. At the end of the conference on the book publishing industry in Nepal organized by the National Booksellers and Publishers' Association of Nepal (NBPAN) in December 1998, two sets of resolutions were passed. The first set urged the government to carry out various actions to promote the publishing industry in Nepal, including the establishment of an autonomous National Book Development Council. The second urged NBPAN itself to do various things including the establishment of a National Book Publishing Trust, a trade school (where skills related to the publishing industry would be imparted), and regular organization of book fairs and forums to exhibit and discuss books. The resolutions also urged NBPAN to publish low-priced editions of books (for the student population) and contribute toward the establishment of libraries around the country.

It is a tragedy that in the three years that have passed, neither the government nor NBPAN has done much to see that those resolutions were implemented. We can leave the government aside for now but the laziness of NBPAN can not be excused. In a program organized at Martin Chautari in August 2001, one office holder of NBPAN himself lamented the fact that the organization had not been able to do much in the intervening years. In response to that complaint, NBPAN's general secretary Madhab Maharjan listed several things his organization was trying to do. Nevertheless the fact remains that while individual publishing houses and booksellers who are the chief members of NBPAN

seem to have done well in the past three years, the organization itself does not even have an adequate office to operate from. That is a telling evidence of the lack of commitment of our publishers to the collective task of promoting books in Nepal.

The fact that members of our media love to write articles on the kind and price of wigs worn by some of our most famous big-screen actors but have seldom looked into the dynamics of the publishing industry (apart from quoting cliché from losers in the publishing and writing communities) is a sad commentary on just how non pro-active our media outlets are regarding the promotion of books in Nepal. The numbers of tame news reportage about book launches and occasional book introductions or reviews in our print media have increased. But they are not done as part of a pro-active agenda of book production on the part of our media institutions. If we are to be satisfied by this increased volume of tame coverage then there is no need for soul-searching. Otherwise media intuitions need to review their own record in promoting a culture of reading in Nepal.

The most successful newspaper in our media history, *Kantipur*, does not even carry a book review page almost 10 years into its existence. Its former editor Yogesh Upadhyia told me more than once that he was envious of the work my colleagues and I were doing in the form of the *Review of Books* in *The Kathmandu Post*. But he rejected our offer to produce a similar thing in his newspaper. Upadhyia's successor, Yubaraj Ghimire, told us that while our idea was great, he would like to produce a review page as an in-house activity and not involve outsiders like us.

Himal Khabarpatrika, Nepal's most successful newsmagazine has not been able to graduate from a single book introduction page almost four years into its existence. Its publisher, Kanak Mani Dixit, never loses an opportunity to lecture media

persons about creativity. But even when he has been involved in his personal capacity to promote the production of good books, neither *Himal Khabarpatrika* nor any other publications of *Himalmedia* have shown regular commitment to promote good-length book reviews related to Nepal-related or Nepali language books.

Himal Khabarpatrika's editor Rajendra Dahal has told me that most of the books he receives for reviews are actually not of the quality that deserves reviews and that there is a dearth of good reviewers. Even if both of these claims were true, it still remains the case that if *Himal* were to carry critical reviews of bad books, they would eventually contribute to bettering the quality of books and the publishing industry in its entirety. Having been part of a review-generating group for six years now, I think that the claim that there is a dearth of good reviewers is exaggerated.

To begin with, in its in-house columnist CK Lal, *Himalmedia* has one of our best and fearsome book reviewers whose one single review was once sufficient to dismantle the professorial ambitions of an architect hack masquerading as a conservationist and urban planner! Dahal could certainly ask Lal to skip some of his, sometimes repetitious, political commentary and urge him to write book reviews in Nepali like they have never been written before. Lal could do it and there are others who are almost as capable. Independent radio stations should also get into the act and as I have argued elsewhere, there is much they could do to promote books in Nepal.

The bottom line is that our media needs to abandon a losers' attitude toward book promotion and become a lot more proactive.

Is anyone listening?

The Work of Journalism: Interrogation

On 8 June 2004 I sent the following note to a friend who edits a Kathmandu publication:

“As you know I have been coordinating the media research group of Martin Chautari (MC) and the Centre for Social Research and Development (CSR) since 2000. In the last four years we have put out eleven books, nine of which have dealt with various aspects of the media in Nepal and the remaining two were reference readers to journalists (and others) regarding the *dalit* and *janajati* movements. Out of the nine media books, seven were products of our own research while the remaining two were books prepared by a practicing media person or analyst. By the end of 2004, we will have produced at least three more books.... You might recall that I gave you some of our books... last year and later you emailed me to say that we were doing something interesting – extending the language of media analysis into Nepali, etc.

Nation Weekly, 7 November 2004; original title ‘Non-interrogating Journalists’

“I would like to request you to assign one of your reporters to do a critical piece on our work (vis-à-vis the media research landscape in Nepal and internationally). Our own analysis suggests that we are not only leading the scene in Nepal in terms of volume of production but we also have reasons to believe that we have contributed toward the creation of infrastructure for good media research and the creation of people who have the skills to uplift this discipline in Nepal. However I am not asking you to praise our work. I am asking you to do a critical inquiry about our record and point out to your readers if there are lessons to be learned about how research could be done in Nepal under conditions that everybody seems to find wanting, namely, supposed (a) shortage of people, (b) shortage of intellectual resources and (c) shortage of funding. I am sure your critical inquiry will also be an eye-opener for us regarding our weak points, both intellectually and in terms of institutional organization of research and will help us to upgrade our own work.

“In addition, from August 2001 we have been holding a fortnightly media discussion series at MC.... In total, we have already organized about 65 such discussions in the past 3 years. Your reporter might want to ask how this culture of discussion is related to good research.

“I make this request because the level of understanding of issues related to social research (including on media) in Nepal exhibited by our *patrakars* leaves a lot to be desired. They seem to have only one thing in their minds – these guys [i.e. we social scientists] do research because they get lots of donor dollars and hence the contents are donor driven. The truth, I am afraid, is something else and remains hidden from the public because our journalists do not take the risk to ask tough questions about us, our work, our funding sources, our research methods, etc. Under

your guidance... I am sure your reporter will do a good job of this analysis.”

Some days later, I got the following note from my editor friend: “Pratyoush, it’s a good idea, one that does warrant a critical look. That said, I really don’t have a reporter who could do a job of it. This because of our staff crunch. But let’s discuss this further. My best shot would be outsourcing.”

In the ensuing months my friend has made no effort to “discuss this further.” That would not have been a source of worry if it were not the case that other editors who I had approached before him had told me much the same. For example, one editor, who never tires of extolling the virtues of social science research, told me more than two years ago that since his reporters were chasing many *other* important stories, he could not assign any to this subject then. It remains that way until now. My worry is also based on other experiences, including some with people who do talk radio.

One of the self-preservation myths that journalists in this country like to reproduce is that they are ‘watchdogs’ of various interests on behalf of the Nepali people. Far from it, from case to case, Nepali journalist’s ability to interrogate people and institutions that make claims in the Nepali public sphere leaves a lot to be desired. Claims regarding a social science operation related to their trade (like the ones I make above) ought to be under their close scrutiny simply because if they can not do even that, their claims to work on behalf of the Nepali people with respect to other topics become suspect. Just to highlight one point, the process of quality monitoring in research and in fields like politics (which keeps most of Nepali journalists busy) is remarkably similar: how to attract good people to your field, how to train them, how to manage the operation financially, how to demonstrate your accountability, etc. Yet no Nepali journalist has asked us these questions and that is my source of worry.

One reader of the magazine *Nation* has asked: what were we (social scientists) doing to mentor a new generation of analysts and what was our gift to Nepali posterity. Before reiterating the ‘watchdog’ claim, Nepali journalists ought to answer these queries of an obviously intelligent reader. They should begin by asking us tough questions.

Is anybody ready to fire them at us?

Debating Media Quality

Much has already been said about the poor state of mainstream journalism during the America-led invasion of Iraq in spring 2003. As far as good journalism is concerned, most of the commentators have argued that CNN, BBC or other international channels were found wanting in their coverage of the war done in the name of 'liberating the Iraqi people.' While more could be said about the failures of Northern media, I am interested in the fallout of this debacle on the debate regarding journalistic standards in the South. It is for this reason that I read Kanak Mani Dixit's brief commentary "Where are the war correspondents?" (*Himal South Asian*, April 2003) with interest.

Dixit argues that the "image of the American press as the exemplar of journalistic accomplishment" became a casualty of the war on Iraq. He adds, "For decades, journalists worldwide, and in the developing world in particular, looked up to their

A slightly different version was published as a letter to the editor, *Himal South Asian*, May 2003

American colleagues with awe (that word!) and respect, as models of probity, independence, courage and investigative zeal.” Having failed miserably on all of these counts, and having resembled “‘government press’ in tin-pot dictatorships”, Dixit argues that it was now time to “cast aside the American media role models. . . . With the Western ideal so blatantly exposed, we must now live in a world where we make our own standards and live up to them.” This is well put but certainly not an easy task to accomplish.

To push this debate further, I would like to suggest that the following points be considered for further deliberations on the subject. First, from the point of view of media studies, it would be an error to suggest that the American media was viewed as the exemplar of journalistic accomplishment by everyone. One need only recall the writings of Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, Robert W McChesney, and Edward Said, among others, to make the point that for a long time, several analysts of the American media have demonstrated its complicity in narrowly policing the parameters of democratic freedom at home while furthering American foreign policy interests abroad, both on behalf of the military-industrial complex. These criticisms have certainly been available to critical media practitioners in the South for a while. But they were unsuccessful in and of themselves in dispensing with the popular ‘exemplar’ myth. While the coverage of the Iraqi invasion has made such criticism available to a larger population of viewers and readers, it is too early to write an obituary of this myth, given its ability to regenerate itself through various means.

Second, with respect to making our own standards, we have to inquire how possible this is in countries like Nepal under conditions of globalization. If forces associated with the market and the state have exposed the erstwhile exemplar, we need to

remember that those very forces are also at work in Nepal and in other countries of the South. Unless we can claim to design the wheel differently, our so-called independent (aka private) media, increasingly dominant in our own mediascapes, are similarly susceptible to market and state led diktats. Hence the political economy of media production does not provide us with too many degrees of freedom to make up our own standards.

Third, making up our own standards is yet more difficult in Nepal because of its significant donor dependency. “Nepali standards” are good to think with for Nepali media but in a situation where even the best journalists are implicated in patronage networks arising from the clout of donor-led dollars, setting up our own independent standards is simply not easy. Northern countries – the ones whose media have been found wanting – routinely provide help (both in terms of money and training) to the media sector in Nepal in the name of enhancing the capacity of native media persons and institutions. Nepal’s best media training institutions and production houses are shot through with donor imperatives and can say ‘no’ to standards tied to the support they get only at their own peril.

Finally, media’s ability, independence and investigative zeal are tied not only to a set of journalistic skills but also to its recognition of diversity and respect for dissent within its own institutions. In Nepal and other countries of the global South, I have seen little evidence of mainstream media making even a modest attempt to make the demographic composition of its staff resemble the demographic profiles of the societies in which they exist. And respect for dissenting imaginations is conspicuous by its absence in our private media. Our media practitioners often refer to themselves as the last bastion of democracy in our societies but they and the institutions in which they work are

hardly democratic. In other words, they are steeped in contradictions similar to those embedded in the ‘exemplar’ myth.

Yes we need to make our own standards but our debates on this subject should start with a focus on the above details, among others.

Donor Support for Media: Public Assessment

I recently read two books that discuss various aspects of the Nepali media under the state of Emergency (November 2001 to August 2002). They are *Sankatkalma Nepali Press* edited by Mahendra Bista (2003) and *Nepali Press during State of Emergency* edited by Chiranjibi Kafle (2003). Both of these books were published by the Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ), the largest elected body of Nepali journalists. Although the English version is more or less a translation of the Nepali one, it is not an exact translation. From these two books we learn a lot about the legal means deployed to curtail various freedoms of the media at the beginning of the emergency, of the execution, arrest and torture of media people by both state forces and by insurgents and the protest activities carried out by FNJ to secure, among other things, the freedom of its members.

However, this essay is not a review of these books. Instead it is an exploration of a statement included in the preface to both

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books by Taranath Dahal, President of FNJ. He writes, “Many non-government organizations thrived in the name of working for press freedom and the international donor agencies also backed them. Whereas (sic), the FNJ continued to suffer resource crunch, as it was unable even to provide a minimum possible humanitarian support to the victims of torture and suppression during this period. This has suggested the need for strong fund base for the FNJ in future.”

Dahal does not specify which NGOs have “thrived in the name of working for press freedom” and which of them were backed by donor agencies. But it is clear that he thinks (a) there are many such organizations; (b) these organizations received lots of money from donors; (c) the quantity and quality of work these organizations did was somehow not proportionate to the money they got; and (d) FNJ did not have enough funds to provide essential support and other services to its members who had become victims of one or other form of atrocities during the period of emergency.

Let us look at these points one at a time. As a media researcher, I have sought information about individuals and organizations that have done work in the field of media freedom. While the number of individuals who have written short articles about this theme in newspapers or magazines is large – I would refer readers to the appropriate listing in *Nepali Media Bibliography* (2003) – the number of NGOs that have worked on this theme is quite small. In fact I can not think of even ten such Nepali organizations.

Second, no information is available in the public domain regarding the volume of donor support for Nepali organizations working on press freedom. Hence Dahal could be correct in assuming that lots of money has been given but I suspect that that is not the case. Donors with offices in Nepal tend to support

media-projects with not so big budgets. Unless such support has been secured from sources outside of Nepal, I would think that the volume of support is not very big.

The third point is related to how the work performed by Nepali organizations ought to be assessed in terms of its quantity, quality and the funding support provided. Given general trends, Dahal's characterization that the quantity and quality of work recorded on the theme of press freedom is not proportionate to the support received is probably correct but we would have to do such an assessment in a case by case basis.

Finally there is no reason to doubt that the FNJ did not have enough resources to provide essential services to its members who had become victims of atrocities during the state of emergency. This requires a discussion about how FNJ has thought about financing its own operation and this is a subject about which not much information has been put out by the FNJ in the public domain.

But to get back to the main point of this essay, I think Dahal's statement points at a more general and pervasive problem regarding assessment of donor support for media in Nepal. It is a fact that the international community has invested a lot of money in capacity enhancement of Nepali media training institutions and media practitioners in the past several decades. However there has not been a single public assessment of this support experience. No one has kept a public record of the types and volumes of assistance that has been rendered to Nepali media practitioners and institutions and there is virtually no analysis of what kind and volume of assistance has worked and what has not.

Surely, there is a plethora of project reports, held in private by the donor agencies and the project executing Nepali institutions. Tacitly it is understood that the primary logic of these reports is, in the last instance, to justify that donor funds were

disbursed in an approved manner and the work proposed in the mutual contract was accomplished. There is a lot of emphasis on the accountability of this kind of assistance but accountability is understood in the sense highlighted by accountants and auditors.

This would have been something to celebrate were it not taking place in the more or less complete absence of accountability understood as (a) honesty and integrity of the application of both intellect and effort on the work at hand; and (b) a public policy debate in which the costs and benefits of alternate support mechanism are discussed comparatively. Donor support for Nepali media is necessary but so is a mechanism that evaluates the kind and quality of such support publicly.

Foreign Direct Investment in Nepali Media

In early June 2001 I met one of the promoters of an English language daily soon to be published out of Kathmandu. He had come to cover the Narayanhiti royal massacre and had dropped by my house to collect sound bytes. The proposed English daily was editorially promoted by a group of Indian journalists and financially supported by non-resident Indian venture capitalists.

He said that the money that was available could not support a new media venture in India, but could go some distance in Nepal. He refused to identify their Nepali partners, but told me that the press had been ordered and a skeleton staff had been hired. I told him that another paper in English meant that those of us who write columns in that language will have an additional option. I should have known that once the word spreads among the self-appointed vigilantes of Nepali nationalism, any foreign

Nepali Times, 10 August 2001; original title 'What to do when Big Brother Knocks'

direct investment (FDI) in media in Nepal would be interpreted as foreign interference in the “sensitive sector of the Fourth Estate”.

Sure enough, last week influential Nepali media bosses said categorically that FDI should not be allowed in the media sector in Nepal to “safeguard Nepali interests”. At a discussion organised by Nepal Patrakar Mahasangh on 2 August, the following reasons were reportedly given to support the argument against FDI:

- Since media is the watchdog of nationalism in any country, which nationalism will a foreign-owned media support?
- Media is related to *bichar* and if foreign investment is allowed, *bideshi bichar* (foreign opinion) will spread.
- Nationalistic considerations have forced even countries like India to stop FDI in their media sector in its entirety.

For now, I think that if FDI will result in the enhancement of the capacity of our reporters, feature writers and copy editors, then it is a good idea. But I am open to be persuaded otherwise. But opponents of FDI in media will first have to abandon all factual errors. For instance, it is incorrect to say that India still bans FDI in media. India has already opened its electronic media market to foreign investors. The most direct impact of this decision has been seen in the dramatic rise of private sector Indian and foreign television in the last few years. The decision to not allow any FDI in the print media was taken by the Indian government in 1955 and several attempts have been made to revise it, most recently during the past year.

Although the Indian government has once again decided to not revise this policy, its decision has not gone unchallenged as is being portrayed by our media bosses. For instance, Swapan Dasgupta, managing editor of *India Today*, published a sharply worded critique of this government position in his newsmagazine on 4 December 2000. Former Indian finance minister

P Chidambaram writing in the same magazine has pointed out the irony of the print media in India being an articulate promoter of foreign direct investment in services, industry, agriculture, and electronic media while opposing the same in its own sector.

How exactly is foreign investment in media in Nepal detrimental to our “national interests”? The general consensus with which our editorial bosses have opposed FDI is a syndrome of the schizophrenia that characterises our dominant national culture whereby evocation of nationalism has been an effective strategy to prevent further debate and scrutiny of the concerned subject. Nepali society is not so weak that some media products supported by foreign investment will break its back. What really is at work behind this bogey of nationalism is fear that the mediocrity of those who rule the Nepali media world will be further exposed. But will this really mark the end of Nepali-language based *bahunbad* that is dominant in our media?

The argument that if FDI were allowed in Nepali media, it would lead to anti-Nepal editorial practice, does not address the logic of the advertisement market. If foreign investors in Nepali media want to make money, then they can only do so by capturing an adequate portion of the Nepali advertisement market. Advertisers can only thrive if they respect the sensibilities of the consumers. And if media products are seen to be “anti-nationalist” in its contents, consumers and advertisers will abandon them with haste. The jingoistic strain of pro-India nationalism in satellite channels promoted by international finance in the Subcontinent must be understood as the attempt of those media outlets to make the Indian middle class feel secure about its own bigoted nationalism including its big-brother-in-the-Subcontinent ego. If a foreign investor-backed media product wishes to thrive in the Nepali advertisement market, it cannot ignore this logic. Hence it

will have to peddle lines that are possibly even more pro-Nepal than that of Radio Sagarmatha.

Opponents of FDI also argue that it would make taking a pro-Nepal editorial stance impossible. If editorial independence were fully determined by the business interests of the promoters, then no self-respecting editor or reporter would allow their names to appear in the masthead, or by the articles. If this could not be the case under foreign investment, then I must assume that it is not already the case now.

If Nepali editors and reporters who worked for FDI supported media product in Nepal (such products could not be produced without their participation) could be suspected for their inability to take a pro-Nepal stance, why should we allow institutions like the Nepal Press Institute to use foreign money in Nepal in the name of enhancing the capacity of Nepali journalists? Or it is the case that foreign money can be spent on training individuals and strengthening media institutions without imparting them *bideshi bichar*, while FDI from those same countries will corrupt Nepali individuals beyond repair?

Opponents of FDI need to remember that the media's ultimate job is to report the truth. If it does this well, the "national" in the much-evoked "national interests" will be greatly democratized and the interests of the most disenfranchised Nepalis will be automatically served. And for truth to be told, this discussion will have to include Nepalis who are not afraid of the new global financial regimes. The debate should address, among other things, how to tackle global competition with quality homegrown products.

I am waiting to be convinced that FDI is a bad idea in the Nepali media sector. Any takers?

Journalists' Association: Circus to Professionalism?

Today and tomorrow, the biggest organization of Nepali journalists, Nepal Patrakar Mahasangh, will be meeting in Lalitpur to hold their national convention. If we were to insist on technicalities, we would have to say that they would actually be continuing their convention, which was inaugurated in Chitwan a little more than two months ago (in a ceremony where the chief guest was a political leader affiliated with the Nepali Congress Party) but stalled under extremely embarrassing circumstances. In recent days, several commentators have pointed out different themes that need attention in this convention. In this essay I shall merely take stock of what has been said as most of it might have escaped the notice of readers who either can not or do not read the Nepali language press. I shall begin with what happened in Chitwan.

The Kathmandu Post, 12 September 1997; original title 'Journalism: Circus to Professionalism?'

The Chitwan Circus: Not being a journalist I was not in Chitwan for the stalled convention. Based on reports that were subsequently published in various newspapers and magazines, and what I heard from some journalist friends who were there, what happened in Chitwan deserves to be called a circus, a bad one where probably not a single participant had any fun.

The origins of the circus, according to a report published by journalist Tanka Panta who was there, lies in the nature of the process through which membership in the Chitwan district branch of the Mahasangh had been distributed. In a district that can boast at most 40 working journalists, the number of members, it is reported had swelled to over 140 people by the inclusion of non-journalists. The district branch was divided into two factions well before the decision to hold the national convention in Chitwan was taken by the central committee of the Mahasangh. While the Mahasangh had given recognition to only one of the factions as its official branch, members of the other faction had accused this 'official' Chitwan branch for including "non-journalists who were pimps" in their fold. The 'official' branch, in turn, had returned the same accusation against the other faction. Instead of trying to resolve this conflict in what was to be the convention hosting branch way before journalists arrived in Chitwan, the central committee did nothing until the day on which the convention was scheduled to begin.

Panta reports that the central committee, in a desperate last-minute attempt to resolve the crisis, recommended that in the executive committee of the 'official' Chitwan branch, the position of the secretary and two members be vacated and filled with journalists of the 'non-official' faction. When this recommendation was put forth as the closed session of the convention began, leaders and members of the 'official' faction refused to agree with this request. Instead the head of this faction took over the

microphone and charged that his team would strip the clothes of the members of the central committee and make them run across the Narayani River naked. All journalists assembled in Chitwan were insulted when the lodges and hotels where they were staying were told to send them packing; otherwise the 'official' faction would not pay the hotel bills. The Mahasangh central committee could not exercise its control and the convention was stalled.

Journalists who never get tired of telling the rest of society about their Fourth Estate status had precipitated and participated in one of the most embarrassing circuses of post-Jana Andolan Nepal. In a letter published in a popular Nepali language weekly, journalist Surendra Thapa Magar, a central assembly member of the Mahasangh, said that after what he witnessed in Chitwan, he would have to conclude that journalism was one of the three most degrading professions in Nepal (the other two being politics and the legal profession). He further added that he would not be surprised if participating journalists came to the closed session of the next convention, armed not with pens but with sticks.

The Search for Professionalism: In an attempt to exhort his professional colleagues to become self-critical, Thapa Magar asked why a group that took up reporting on the injustices and distortions of the society at large should not report on the distortions that had set in within the profession. Without such a cleansing process, he hinted, it could be difficult for journalists to find their professional integrity in Nepali society. In his report, journalist Panta emphasized that the search for professionalism should begin by cleansing the Mahasangh of non-journalists and finding a leadership that would refuse to run the organization according to the directives of political parties. Journalist Min Bahadur Shahi has concluded that short of a generational change in the leadership of the Mahasangh, the kinds of changes that would generate professionalism amongst journalists will not be

realized. He has thus called the present leadership to hand over the baton, so to speak, to the younger breed of journalists who will, he hopes, wipe out the black marks from their profession.

Prolific columnist Amrita Banskota has asked for a clarification from the profession's bosses as to what exactly are the purposes served by journalists in Nepal. She has asked senior journalists who often boast of practising professionalism if their surrendering of their pen to the dictates of various political factions constitutes a subject necessary for scrutiny during the Mahasangh's convention. If this is not in the agenda, then what is, she asks bluntly before adding whether the Mahasangh has become a platform for furthering the political aspirations of its central committee members. She criticises the double standards practiced by the journalism bosses—preaching journalistic idealism in the classroom and practicing its exact opposite at work—and asks how the code of conduct drawn up by such a group could actually be implemented in the profession.

The various calls for the apex body of journalists to clean up its act are timely and necessary. Its bosses should pay attention to the criticisms summarized above and presented at greater length elsewhere by other members of the profession. The Lalitpur convention, I hope, will begin with a frank discussion of the Chitwan circus. I then hope that most of the closed sessions will be devoted to critical analyses of the malignancies that exist within the profession. Without such a cathartic exercise, this body will have lost its right to represent the truly hard-working and brilliant journalists of this land who might then have to ask themselves if such organisations are actually detrimental for the healthy growth of their professional.

It would be no exaggeration to say that in their current avatar, the Nepal Patrakar Mahasangh and cognate organizations have lost the moral rights to champion the cause of the so-called Fourth

Estate. If acts of cleansing are not forthcoming in the Lalitpur convention, I hope that a younger breed of journalists will declare the Mahasangh as a professional liability and wage a war against the current bosses of journalism in Nepal. Without such a revolution perhaps, journalism's embarrassing ills will be with us for a long time to come.

Creating a National News Service

Since 1990, there has been much talk about privatizing government-owned media organizations such as the Gorkhapatra Sansthan, Radio Nepal and Nepal Television. For reasons that are not very clear to me, the Rastriya Samachar Samiti (RSS) is usually left out from this debate. Given that there is a clear need for a media organization that can provide nationwide news service and the unlikeliness of a new private venture along this front, the RSS needs to be de-governmentalized and given a new shape to function as an effective national news service organization.

How does RSS work at the moment? Rastriya Sambad Samiti was established in 2019 v.s.. following the merger of two previous news-gathering agencies. From about 2028 v.s. it has been known as Rastriya Samachar Samiti. The Nepal Government (NG) owns at least 51 per cent of the total shares. RSS employees own at least 25 per cent of the shares and the rest of the shares are

The Kathmandu Post, 5 March 1999

owned by the public. According to the RSS Act, 2019 v.s. (which has been revised on many different occasions, most recently in 2047 v.s.), the RSS is required to gather and distribute news that highlight “the Nepali national view-point.” Such news, the Act adds, must be objective and reliable, and must advance the welfare of the people and society of Nepal. The activities of RSS are managed and supervised by a board consisting of five people, headed by the Chairman cum General Manager (GM) who is appointed by NG through the Ministry of Communications (MOC). NG also retains the right to appoint as many advisors to the board as it deems necessary. The tenure of the board members is for four years but since NG retains the right to appoint and dismiss the GM, the frequent changes in the central government have resulted in frequent appointments and dismissals of the GM of RSS. RSS’s main source of income is the grant provided by NG. In addition, it earns money by selling news to Radio Nepal, Nepal Television, Gorkhapatra Sansthan and other private media organizations.

The headquarters of RSS are located in Kathmandu. It has offices in all 14 zones of Nepal and regional offices in Biratnagar, Pokhara and Nepalgunj. RSS has correspondents in all 14 zones of Nepal. It also has TV reporters based in Pokhara and Nepalgunj who send their reports directly to Nepal Television (this arrangement has not worked all that well recently). With respect to news collection in the 75 districts of Nepal, in addition to its own employees, RSS has about 60 - 65 independent stringers. In its Kathmandu office, RSS has about 20 reporters. In addition, in each of its English and Nepali desks, RSS has a chief reporter, five editors, and one editor-in-chief. News is put out in both Nepali and English. Additionally two editors are employed in its international bulletin section. RSS issues five Nepal-related news bulletins each day from its Kathmandu office.

Each news piece is carried both in Nepali and English. Its office in Biratnagar also puts out a regional bulletin for about 300 costumers. News collection for the tarai region, especially eastern tarai is done through the Biratnagar regional office.

Bulletins issued from Kathmandu and Biratnagar are also available on-line. With respect to international news, RSS collects news from AP (USA), AFP (France), Xinhua (China) and PTI (India) via satellite-computer links. Its relationship with these foreign news agencies is usually governed by 2-year agreements. RSS editors translate news received from these agencies into Nepali. RSS issues its international news bulletin, both in Nepali and English, two times a day. RSS's Computer networking facilities are currently being enhanced so that RSS news will be available on-line all over Nepal where STD connections exist.

RSS carries news from the political, economic and social domains. Since it is largely government-owned, it gives priority to news about NG and its offices. Like in other news agencies, editors select what is put out in the RSS bulletins from the news received. However, news that might be of general interest but not favorable to the government, is not carried by RSS. Hence editors not only edit news filed by correspondents to make them journalistically presentable but also to suit the pro-government stance of the organization. Within the last one year, RSS correspondents have also started doing feature articles and some of these have been of exceptional quality.

The chief strength of this organization is its national network that surpasses the capacity of any other press organization in Nepal. Its chief weakness is its pro-government stance and hence it cannot, in its present format, become an organization which puts pressure on NG as a watchdog media organization. For this to happen, the government's share in RSS must be sold off. Instead of complete privatization, turning it into a cooperative-like

organization or a public-owned organization must be considered. Perhaps any discussion related to this subject should first put to rest the doubts of the skeptics regarding the viability of such a cooperative or public-owned organization. They will inevitably ask if a public-owned Nepal related news selling organization can be financially viable in the long run. Given the growth of the media sector in Nepal and its Kathmandu-centric structural feature, a properly managed RSS that provides news coverage from all parts of Nepal could survive by selling news to other Nepali media organizations and to international news agencies. Senior journalist Bhairav Risal who worked for the RSS for 22 years thinks that such a possibility exists.

De-governmentalizing RSS and creating the possibility for a media organization that is truly nationwide should be one of the primary agendas of the NG.

Media Advocacy, What?

In the recent past, all kinds of *bikase* (development) organizations and activists - donors, INGOs, NGOs, individuals - have started to emphasize that “advocacy” should be one of the important “projects” of all development agents in Nepal. Many INGOs, fearful that they might be seen as meddling too directly in the affairs of Nepal, actually do not use the term “advocacy” and instead prefer to talk about how policies could be “influenced”. When the term is used by Nepali NGOs, advocacy usually refers to *both public* education campaigns in the name of “awareness raising” and to efforts by such organizations (or increasingly, networks of organizations) toward supporting a specific cause via policy and legislative level initiatives (an issue I return to later). After working at the micro-level for decades, these INGOs and NGOs now claim that more needs to happen at the macro—state policy, legislature, judiciary, etc.—level as well if millions of dollars are not going to be poured into projects that do not produce significantly tangible changes.

The Kathmandu Post, 19 June 1998

Defining Advocacy: One manual provides multiple definitions of advocacy: “Advocacy is putting a problem on the agenda, providing a solution to that problem and building support for acting on both the problem and solution.” Yet another definition: “Advocacy consists of different strategies aimed at influencing decision-making at the organizational, local, provincial, national and international levels.” The same manual goes on to state: “Effective advocacy may succeed in influencing policy decision-making and implementation by educating leaders, policy makers, or those who carry out policies; reforming existing policies, laws and budgets, developing new programs; creating more democratic, open and accountable decision-making structures and procedures.”

Writing in the *Resource Kit for Advocacy and Campaign Building* published by the National Centre for Advocacy Studies based in Pune, India, Dr Nirmala S Pandit states “The course of advocacy efforts on any particular issue would be determined on the basis of strategies used, tactics employed and skills exercised.” The effectiveness of advocacy campaigns depends on, according to Pandit, how efficiently the following strategies are deployed: identification and framing of the issues; information collection; mobilisation of interested people and network formation; campaign planning; involvement of the media; and building up of pressure on the legislature. Although the list contains many strategies, our attention here is limited to the role of the media. Since it is supposed that the media can give broad exposure to the issue being advocated and that it can influence large masses and the most influential actors at the same time, the media is considered to be a very effective tool for advocacy. Yet the term “media advocacy” has not received much scrutiny in our country.

Defining Media Advocacy: The *Resource Kit* referred to earlier defines media advocacy as the “strategic use of mass media

... to advance a social or public policy initiative” and lists a 10-step process: Defining goals, objectives and time-lines; defining and understanding the target audience; using research to design and tailor the message to the target audience; framing the issue; developing press lines (i.e., catchy phrases impressed upon press people through reiteration); choosing appropriate media channels; developing quality materials; choosing and training appropriate spokespersons; coalition building and networking; and evaluation.

However, the *Resource Kit* and other manuals fail to rise above the perspective of a single organization or coalition while thinking about the issue of media advocacy. In other words, while recognizing the heterogeneity of media forms (hence the talk about “choosing appropriate media channels”) they treat media as a simple conduit where the issue being advocated can be dumped for it to be elaborated by reporters and editors for the large masses. The press is treated as a passive instrument that can be “strategically used” to serve the cause of advocacy. The manuals seem to be saying that once the issue is well identified by the advocates, and when it is effectively presented or imposed on the press, it will show up in the media. This line of thinking is hardly surprising given that such manuals have been produced to help a single organization or coalition prepare its strategy regarding one important aspect (media) of policy-targeted advocacy. Manuals are expected to provide neat, step-by-step, procedures if they are to be useful to a generic set of users; they are not scholarly treatises that necessarily take into consideration the varieties and complexities that characterize media organizations.

Media Advocacy vs Awareness Campaign: The *Resource Kit* makes a distinction between a media advocacy campaign and a public education media campaign. It defines media advocacy as advocacy that creates social change by advancing public policy initiatives and public education media campaigns as the attempts

of the relevant organizations or coalitions “to create awareness, attitudinal change and behavioral change on an individual and community level.” However as mentioned earlier, the term “media advocacy” as used by various NGOs in Nepal, encompasses what the manual defines as public education media campaign. The NGO activists that I have talked to while researching for this essay do not distinguish between the two. They say creating awareness and making attitudinal changes are part of advocacy and the media can help achieve these goals.

In the words of researcher Shizu Upadhya, “this understanding seems to bypass the very fact that ‘advocacy’ should be much more pro-active, not just hoping that somehow raised awareness will do the trick.” We can find many examples to argue that raised awareness alone will not do the trick. Consider the problem of trafficking in Nepali women. As discussed in a recent study done by *Asmita*, the media has reported this issue so many times that the general readers have reached a level of reading fatigue regarding this issue. The policy documents like the National Action Plan for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (1997) do reflect an acknowledgement of the severity of this problem in Nepal but the problem seems to be growing in magnitude. So even after the media has contributed to creating general awareness regarding the severity of this problem and helped in putting it in the agenda of national discussions, an effective solution seems unlikely to materialize in the near future.

The failure to distinguish between media advocacy and public education media campaign gets more complicated when we keep in mind that advocacy issues are, more often than not, multi-faceted and less than clear-cut types (e.g. *kamaiya*, property rights, child labour). As Upadhya asks “We may all be in favour of the liberation of the *kamaiya* (bonded laborers), but what

exactly are we advocating for?” In other words, this failure divorces “NGOs from the responsibility of taking the time out to do their homework and take specific stands on issues.” Taking specific positions should become the first step of NGO advocacy. If this position is made clear to the members of the media repeatedly then NGOs can easily withstand the charge that their attention span on any issue is short-lived.

Finally, for media advocacy to work, the working relationship between NGOs and media people need to be based on a greater level of mutual understanding. The difficulties inherent in creating such an understanding in Nepal will be discussed in the next essay.

Modeling NGO-Media Relationships

In the previous essay, I tried to bring conceptual clarity to the notion of media advocacy by suggesting that an organizational (e.g. a single NGO or a network of NGOs) perspective on how to strategically use the media to serve the cause of advocacy was both naive and inadequate: naive because such a perspective treats the media as a passive instrument for message dissemination; and inadequate because activist NGOs fail to make a distinction between media advocacy campaigns and public education media campaigns. In this essay, I try to model some of the complexities that need to be considered when we talk about media advocacy once we have abandoned the notion of media as a passive medium of intervention.

To begin to appreciate these complexities, let us reduce the set of social actors involved in media advocacy to just two groups: NGOs who want to advance a cause and independent media organizations. Since the interests of these two groups do not

necessarily coincide and even when they do, the respective notions advanced by each group as to what media advocacy entails might differ significantly, there is a lot of tension between them. To understand this scenario, let us reduce the universe of possibilities to just the following three cases:

a) NGOs as self-producers of media materials: Here those advancing the cause produce the actual media material and provide it to media organizations. These materials can come in several forms. They could simply be press releases that routinely “feed” the media with information on the subject being advocated. With respect to the print media, these materials can come in the form of feature articles written by members of the NGOs. In the electronic media (radio and television), this can come as sponsored simple information-disseminating programs or ‘magazine-reportage’ style broadcasts. While writing skills are needed for the earlier cases, necessary skilled personnel have to be found for the production of materials for the electronic media. Moreover sponsoring of programs in the electronic media is usually very expensive and hence this is an option that is only available to well-funded NGOs. But when the money can be found and since the contract between the NGOs and the media organizations broadcasting such programs can clarify the exact terms, this situation might not result in too much “tension” between the NGOs and media organizations. As an example of such a production is the radio programs prepared by the organization SAATHI (on the theme of violence against women) that were broadcast over Radio Nepal in 1994.

b) NGOs support media production but do not control the contents: Here those advancing the cause provide financial and other support for the production of good magazine or reportage copy by independent journalists but do not control or censor its final contents. Such support can come in the form of fellowships to journalists or media organizations.

In such an arrangement, since professional media people might come up with story angles that do not necessarily advance the advocacy cause of the funding organization(s), there can be some tension between the two sides. A recent example of such an effort is the generous fellowship provided to journalists by Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC) via the Nepal Patrakar Mahasangh. One of the main themes that has been advocated by INSEC concerns the elimination of the *kamaiya* system and six fellowships were given to journalists to go to west Nepal to cover this issue. The reports published by some of them, including those written by Haribahadur Thapa of Kantipur, did not portray the *kamaiya* system in stark and miserable terms that one encounters in INSEC's own publications.

c) Advocacy groups and independent media production: It is here that much of the tension and politics related to media advocacy can be found. Organizations advancing a cause invite media people to their programs and projects in the hope that they will get good coverage. Even when "satisfactory" reporting of the issues but not those of the organizers (in their perspective) has been done, the latter have resorted to all kinds of means to get even with reporters. Such angry organizers have visited the management personnel of influential publications and have also engaged in threatening shouting matches with reporters. Reporters in turn, claim that NGO activists remain mostly oblivious of the conditions and constraints (financial and other resources, gatekeeping politics within media organizations, etc) within which Nepali journalists work. This lack of understanding (and mutual trust) is a major source of tension between advocacy groups and media people.

Moreover media organizations also come in different sizes and shapes and represent various social groups as such. Government owned and controlled Nepal TV and Radio Nepal

as well as Gorkhapatra Sansthan serve different interests from those served by commercial media houses such as Kantipur Publications and Kamana Prakashan. Then there are the likes of Asmita and Sancharika Samuha who, even as they are independent media organizations, are committed to producing generally pro-women gendered reportage or feature articles. This variety in media organizations introduces its own tensions both within and between media personnel and advocacy groups.

While greatly reduced into three neat models, the above discussion should help us to see some of the complexities that make up the world of media advocacy in Nepal. In actuality, the number of players and agents involved are greater than the two major groups identified above. Even within each group there will be tensions emanating from competition for funds, affiliations along political party lines, and personality clashes in and between member organizations. On the other hand, the hierarchy within different types of media organizations or their gatekeeping policies might work against the good intentions of reporters who personally support the advocacy theme but are unable to publish detailed reports on it as often as they would like to. Hence even if the number of such journalists were to suddenly increase, this might not mean that the media would necessarily further advance positions advocated by activists.

To conclude then, let me repeat the effort presented in this and the last essay. I have discarded simple notions of media advocacy from an organizational perspective and instead suggested that we need a more nuanced, societal view of what it means to use the media as a tool of advocacy. By pointing out that different tensions exist within and between advocacy groups and media organizations, I have recognized that the different actors involved in this process have interests that do not necessarily coincide. This situation creates the multiply inflected politics that

characterize the Nepali NGO world, the media organizations and personnel and the relationship between the two sides. A more thorough consideration is necessary if we are to tame the debilitating aspects of these politics and if our discussion about media advocacy is to rise above banal grounds. After all we should be able to work toward a society where informed coverage of important issues becomes a routine matter in all kinds of media. In that society, the term “media advocacy” would, of course, be redundant!

Writers, Remuneration and Independence

I have argued elsewhere that taming our corrupt politicians would require us to identify in minute detail the conditions – financial, cultural and otherwise – in which fragmentary counter-points of power and resistance can survive beyond a minimum level of hope. If that is so we have to ask ourselves about the financial resources that can sustain writers who want to devote their lives to creating a node of counter-power through their writings, taming the social turf controlled by politicians in the process? In other words, how can writers who want to remain independent from and in opposition to political masters make a living in Nepal?

I have chosen this subject because there is already an ongoing discussion on this topic in the Nepali print world regarding literary writers, one that would not have received the attention of those readers whose access to the Nepali media is only through the English language.

The latest round of discussion about remuneration for writers began when the literary magazine *Utsaha* organized a discussion in Kathmandu on 6 December 1997. Asked to present a set of questions pertinent to the current status of literary magazines in Nepal to initiate the discussion, fiction writer and essayist Khagendra Sangraula wondered, among other things, how it is that Nepali literary magazines seldom remunerated the contributors. He added that in the wake of growth in literary magazines, this status quo – namely the lack of payment to writers – has become a bigger problem as all kinds of publishers and editors of the new publications come to writers like him, asking for literary contributions. Elaborating the subject Sangraula stated, even if a writer were to be paid a token amount of money for each publication, it would contribute toward supporting his needs, thereby releasing some more time and resources for the writer to engage in creative activities.

On the occasion, critic Ninu Chapagain (who is the chief editor of *Bedana*), responded to Sangraula by asking how editors or publishers could pay the writers when the work of the editors themselves went unremunerated and most publishers were not making any money with their publications. This debate was carried one step forward when poet Govinda Bartaman discussed the subject at some length in a forceful essay published in the weekly newspaper *Jana Ekata* (5 January 1998). Bartaman elaborated the problem in this manner: When the publisher has to pay for typesetting, layout, printing, and give a commission to hawkers or sellers, how is it that no budget is set aside for the writers whose creations make the magazines saleable in the first instance? If writers want their self-esteem to flourish in a practical manner, he added, they need to boycott those editors and publishers who expect free contributions.

Essayist Rudra Kharel has responded to the position elaborated by Sangraula and Bartaman (*Jana Ekata*, 9 February 1998). Many of the *pragatishil* (progressive) literary magazines and their editors are committed to the process of creating a just society for all, writes Kharel and hence writers need to decide to what extent they want to be associated with this process. In other words, while saying that remuneration for writers is a necessity, Kharel argues that not all magazines currently are in a position to pay their writers. Kharel might have a point regarding the unremunerated sharing of positive externality resulting from published writings between writers and editors but in the absence of any programmes on the part of the so-called *pragatishil* magazines regarding when they might begin to pay their writers, his position amounts to revolution-farming, a theme that plagues the entire spectrum of left thinking in Nepal. By promising the “just society” after the “revolution”, current exploitation of writers can be justified!

Outside of this camp, the remuneration scenario of literary writings is not significantly better. When publications do pay, they pay but a few hundred rupees. The royalties that writers are paid for the case of books, if paid at all, amount to a similar figure. When literary writers publish their work in commercial publications (such as newspapers or magazines), they are hardly paid over Rs 500 a piece.

The scene of non-literary writers isn't any better. Take, for instance, the case of those who write for newspapers like *Kantipur* or *The Kathmandu Post*. Heralded as great successes of the private sector initiative in the field of media after the *Jana Andolan*, a feature writer would be lucky if she managed to get paid Rs 500 for an article in either of these publications. The remuneration scale for these and other newspapers (if they pay at all) has remained more or less the same since 1993. For the

case of newsmagazines, the case is slightly better but the scale there too does not support the financial needs of a writer who lives by writing alone.

To sum up then, while the contents and the politics of Nepali writers and writings of various types might give us hope, without further search for other financial sources that can support such writings, the hope therein will always remain fragmentary. The degrees of independence that writers can marshal as a group will continue to be limited.

To surpass this sorry state of affairs—I remind you that I have only discussed the financial front here whereas there are also other serious problems to be dealt with in the Nepali writers' world—we need to figure out a diverse set of ways to support writers. Publishing houses need to do a lot more to organize a better distribution system for their publications before complaining that there aren't many readers of good writings in Nepal. Publishers and editors who cannot afford to pay writers need to consolidate their resources to produce a more financially solvent publication, one in which authors get compensated. As long as Nepal remains a *bikase* state steeped in donor funding, writers as a group should also become eligible for development funding.

While this is not the space to discuss the mechanics of these various arrangements, the bottom line is this: until we begin to put together a portfolio of financial support - thus diluting the risk of any one source becoming the master of the writers' intellect - that can sustain the independence of writers, it will be premature to hope that writers as a group can curb the rapacity of Nepal's politicians. This applies for other social fields as well.

How might we do this? Any ideas?