

Arjun Panthi, Pratyoush Onta and Harsha Man Maharjan, eds. 2013. *Nepali Magazinekā 25 Varṣa (2046–2070 v.s.)*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

Pluralism in media is essential for a vibrant democratic culture. For pluralism to be more than a token it should encompass diversity both in media content and in the personnel. The beginnings of democratic and plural space in the Nepali media can be traced to the periods following the 1990 People's Movement. In particular, the economic and political liberalization of the 1990s created a vibrant civil society, and shaped a new mediascape marked by new technologies, competition, and private investments. This was illustrated in the proliferation of several dailies, weekly, and “specialized” magazines, including the phenomenal growth of FM radio stations.

Some statistics in order to fully capture the extraordinary growth of the media during the period: for instance, the number of new magazine titles grew from 28 in 2047 v.s. to 140 in 2054 v.s. This growth continued

thereafter whereby 328 new titles appeared in the market during the two calendar years 2056 v.s. and 2057 v.s. To put this in perspective, 823 new titles published in a decade (2048–2057 v.s.) almost equaled the sum total of all the new magazines published in the preceding three decades (865; 2018–2047 v.s.) during the Panchayat system (p. 7). In the realm of radio broadcast, the change was more remarkable as the state monopoly over radio broadcast ended in 1997 and by 2000, ten private and community owned FM radio stations were dotting urban as well as rural areas across Nepal.²

Several factors account for this rapid expansion of the Nepali media landscape. The emergent politics of identity saw various ethnic and lingual groups trying to shape the contours of the public discourse through print and radio. During the same time, party affiliated media platforms also witnessed quite a remarkable growth. The commercial viability of these in the long run remained a challenge owing to the lack of loyal readership, limited advertising market, changing discourses and political instability. As a result, of the numerous magazine titles that have been registered since, only few are in regular circulation today. Some with even good commercial prospects have disappeared. However, no systematic academic study of the ebb and flow of the media landscape has been carried out. *Nepali Magazinekā 25 Varṣa (2046–2070 v.s.)* published by Martin Chautari attempts to fill this void. Edited by Arjun Panthi, Pratyoush Onta and Harsha Man Maharjan, the book traces the history of the major magazines in the post 1990 period.

The volume is organized around three broad themes: mainstream, alternative and experiences. The “mainstream” section has five articles. The first article by Arjun Panthi analyzes how *Janamañca* cultivated professional journalism despite its political affiliation to Nepali Congress party. Panthi especially highlights *Janamañca*’s innovative presentation styles and content diversification that were subsequently emulated by various other weekly and fortnightly magazines. The magazine however became the victim of political feud within the Nepali Congress party and eventually was shuttered.

The second article also by Arjun Panthi asks whether *Himāl* magazine (formerly fortnightly and currently weekly) pursued the “middle path” to remain commercially viable. Panthi argues that *Himāl* consistently supported liberal democracy, liberal market economy and constitutional monarchy. This article traces how this middle path has transformed with changed political

² See www.moic.gov.np/upload/documents/fm-list-2072-08-14.pdf; accessed 15 November 2015.

set up. For example, *Himāl* advocated for constitutional monarchy even after the coup (on 1 February 2005) by the then King Gyanendra but did not pursue this agenda following the success of the People's Movement in April 2006. The article is enlightening as it traces the mission or partisanship of commercially successful *Himāl* magazine.

Ramesh Rai, in the next article, argues that Kantipur Publications began publishing *Nepal* magazine primarily to claim competitive edge over other publishers than to make profit. Rai also suggests that frequent changes in the editorial leadership at *Nepal* meant it did not build the kind of ideological coherence and consistency as *Himāl* would under its publisher Kanak Mani Dixit. It would have been interesting to hear more on the various ideological agendas pursued by *Nepal* under different editorial tutelage.

The fourth article written by Harsha Man Maharjan and Arjun Panthi studies how the Maoist affiliated magazines simultaneously maintained party allegiance and vibrant market share both during and after the Maoist People's War. During war time, the Maoist magazines operated in Soviet Communist model. The party published mouthpieces that were replete with propaganda and demonization of the "enemy" class. If the party provided bulk of the financial support, party workers were directly involved in the production and distribution of the magazines through their existing organizational structures. Gradually, however, the Maoist did utilize advertisement revenue to reduce financial burden, which became more common after it joined the peace process in 2006. This period also witnessed an interesting trend whereby individual Maoist leaders began patronizing new magazines to push their respective ideology in the public domain. This eventually led to the dissolving of the centralized wartime propaganda structure and made these publications compete with each other making them more dependent on market forces.³ Maharjan and Panthi do a good job of outlining this transformation. The article however conflates the Maoist magazines with other market produced magazines. In doing so, it fails to link up with the available theoretical literature on the topic. In light of the many theoretical studies on the relationship between the weakness in the centralized media structure and the fall of the Soviet Communism (see, for example, Sparks

³ For example, *Lāl Rakṣak* published by the Young Communist League was close to Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal aka Prachanda and *Hāmro Jaljalā* was close to leader Mohan Vaidya aka Kiran and his faction.

1998), a more nuanced study could have pushed the analysis in seeing if and to what extent similar relationship existed in Nepal.

The last article by Tirtha Bista chronicles the evolution of Kantipur Publication's youth-focused *Sarvottam* magazine first into *Sarvottam Nārī* and eventually to *Nārī*. Bista argues that *Nārī*, in cultivating an ideal of "modern woman" by glamorizing them and highlighting their presence in non-conventional professions, promotes a uniquely urban middle class notion of womanhood. As such, its audience also comes from the same strata. Ironically, the magazine that claims to espouse women's empowerment further aids in commodifying women's bodies and the promoting consumerism.

There are four articles under "alternative stream magazines" theme. Purna Basnet, tracing the history of the NGO-published *Himāl, Hākāhākī, Bikās* and *Asmitā*, makes a case that though these magazines played crucial roles in shaping various ideas of development, they struggled to stay afloat in the market driven by the template of advertisement revenue. Bandana Dhakal's study of *Asmitā* magazine is an illustrative example. Despite its pioneering role in shaping the Nepali feminist discourse, *Asmitā* today is in the state of "suspended animation."⁴ Dhakal suggests that the failure to balance donor interests and market imperatives (advertisers and readers) that led to the closure of *Asmitā* can be a valuable lesson and wake-up call for other struggling magazines too.

In the third contribution in the section, Pratyoush Onta and Devraj Humagain studying the *Ādivāsi-Janajāti* (indigenous nationalities) magazines published during the 1990s argue that such magazines contributed in spreading lingual, cultural and religious consciousness in the public sphere. Most importantly the *Ādivāsi-Janajāti* magazines, the duo claim, expanded the discourses on collective identity by emphasizing various discriminations against the groups. The authors, however, presume that the readers would be familiar with the concept of public sphere and do not define it or explain its evolution. In the last piece of the section Krishnaraj Sarvahari examines the major trends found in the publication of Tharu magazines. He raises important points about the sustainability of Tharu magazines due to limited market (advertisement) and readership.

⁴ After a long hiatus the magazine was out in the market in 2015 but with an appendage *Hāmro* after *Asmitā*. In 2016 the magazine again seems to have vanished from the market.

The last theme of the book aptly titled “experiences” includes critical personal reflections of five influential editors – Sudheer Sharma (*Nepāl*), Shyam Shrestha (*Mūlyāṅkan*), Rajendra Maharjan (*NabaYuwā*), Ram Bahadur Ramtel of Dalit magazine *Jana Utthān* and Pratik Ngesur Tamang of Tamang magazine *Chār Goṅmā*. All five document various dimensions of magazine journalism over the period under discussion. Sudheer Sharma beyond discussing his own experience at *Nepāl* magazine also briefly reflects on the history of other news magazines such as *Janamañca*, *Biśwamitra*, *Kathmandu Today*, and *Himāl*. The editors of *Mūlyāṅkan* and *NabaYuwā* particularly focus on their struggles in keeping the left leaning magazines commercially viable. Both Shrestha and Maharjan do not offer any explanation on the closure of these magazines.

Alternative magazines, which generally provide platforms for views and ideas otherwise ignored in the mainstream journalism, are rarely successful because of limited readership and advertising market, wavering commitment from team members due to the lack of monetary benefits and the government’s failure to recognize these magazines as a tool to expand the public sphere. In a way, the absence of a successful model of alternative magazine can be read as an indictment of the limited nature of the Nepali public sphere. The shrinking of alternative space has only accelerated in the recent years. In that regard, despite the clamor of identity politics the prospect for identity based magazines does not look too bright. Part of this has also to do with the transformative shift in the way news is produced and consumed on the web today. The advent of digital social media and 24-hour TV news cycle today pose existential threat to traditional media. The book fails to consider these epochal challenges posed by new technology and shifting market imperatives. The hardest hit by this shift are the magazines as even some internationally reputed magazines (e.g., *Newsweek*) have moved to web only publication. This is more so for the alternative magazines, which the book fails to highlight.⁵

To conclude, the book provides rare glimpses into the history of Nepali magazines over a period of 25 years. Student and scholars interested in

⁵ For example, there are numerous Dalit and *Ādivāsi-Janajāti* focused online portals operated in Nepal and even from abroad. One influential example is www.esamata.com, which Rajendra Maharjan, the former editor of *NabaYuwā* and team member of *Mūlyāṅkan* monthly is the editor.

Nepali media and social history would find this book to be very illuminating and useful.

Reference

Sparks, Colin. 1998. *Communism, Capitalism and the Mass Media*. London: Sage.

Indra Dhoj Kshetri
Kathmandu