



Review Paper

Nepali Nationalism and Media: A Critical Review

Binit Gurung

Department of English, St. Xavier's College, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, NEPAL

Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 4th November 2014, revised 11th January 2015, accepted 13th February 2015

Abstract

Media reports in Nepal are often replete with cautionary headlines about the looming danger of disintegration of the country. This is how mainstream media generally reacts to the assertion of the cultural identity by different marginalized ethnic communities. Nationalism is a tactical trump card played by the political elites to delegitimize the aspirations of the marginalized ethnic groups. Media has traditionally been an instrument of political elites to manufacture consent on dominant discourses by mass dissemination. There is no doubt media played a crucial role in shaping Nepali nationalism as we know it today. With the abolishment of monarchy in 2008, the political landscape in Nepal has radically changed so much so that Nepali nationalism and the media have unprecedentedly come under fire. The article aims to critically review the ills of Nepali nationalism and media.

Keywords: Nepali nationalism, Media and Inclusion.

Introduction

It is not uncommon among people to use the terms 'state' and 'nation' interchangeably. A state is basically understood as a political community marked by a territory with a government in place that exercises legitimate authority. On the other hand, 'nation' refers to a body of people who identify each other as 'one' on account of shared culture, language and history among others. Gellner defines nationalism as a political principle that stresses on the congruence of national and political unit¹.

The origin of Nepali state can be traced to Prithivi Narayan Shah, the King of Gorkha, who founded the kingdom of Nepal by conquering and bringing small states under the empire of Gorkha in 1768. The expansionist adventurism of Gorkhali Empire came to a grinding halt following Anglo-Nepal War that led to the signing of Sugauli Treaty in 1816 between the King of Nepal and the East India Company.

The first King of Nepali state Prithivi Narayan Shah's statements like 'Nepal is a garden of 4 jats and 36 varnas' and 'Nepal is an *asil* Hindustan' reflect his vision for Nepal. These two views however are not congruent. The former statement acknowledges the ethnic diversity of the country whereas the latter betrays his intention to impose Hinduism on the peoples of Nepal. Harka Gurung argues that the garden he envisioned was actually imposed by the might of 'sword'².

The process of Hinduization began with Prithivi Narayan Shah and the successive rulers later formalized it into the law. Nepali nationalism as such was however particularly nurtured only during the rule of King Mahendra in the mid 20th century who came with the policy of 'one language, one dress and one

culture' in a land of ethnic and cultural diversity. The Shah King was projected as a Hindu god and thus, legitimized his rule as sanctioned by the divine power. Harka Gurung further argues that Nepal is a 'state' but has not yet become a 'nation' accentuating the exclusionary nature of Nepali nationalism².

Characteristics of Nepali Media

Nepali media is largely dominated by the same groups of people – Brahmin-Chhetri castes- who have always remained dominant in the social, political, economical and cultural spheres of the country. The representation of indigenous ethnic groups in the mainstream media is few and far between. The same is true with other marginalized groups such as Madhesis and Dalits. Brahmin-Chhetri dominated media outlets tend to keep the activism and the issues of the marginalized groups from accessing the public sphere. This is no surprise when the ethnic and caste composition of Nepali media doesn't correspond with the demographic composition of Nepali society³. The dominant groups who dominate the media promote and glorify their cultural products at the expense of the traditional culture of marginalized ethnic groups⁴. The restoration of democracy in the year 1990 saw a boom in media sector. Media has grown quantitatively but has miserably failed in maintaining quality. This numerical growth in media outlets doesn't necessarily result in democratization in the media sector⁵. This is proven by Nepal's own experience of media boom with no substantial democratic contribution.

Characteristics of Nepali Nationalism

Nepali nationalism is faulty on several counts. First, it is non-inclusive as it is based on the culture, experiences and values of

Hindu upper-caste of the hills. Second, it fails to resonate with the diverse peoples of Nepal who remarkably differ from the common 'Nepali' identity promoted by the state. Third, it privileges the dominant groups and puts the others at a disadvantaged position. Fourth, it seeks to homogenize the heterogeneous population for the sake of cultural uniformity. Nepali nationalism was nurtured and institutionalized during Panchayat era, but has been substantially weakened particularly in the aftermath of 2006 People's Movement II that led to the ouster of two-and-a half centuries old institution of Hindu Monarchy. The sub-nationalisms have now taken the centre stage mainly Madeshi nationalism and Janajati nationalism. The fact that an ethnic group having its own language, culture, religion, among others is a nation in its own right has gained currency among the peoples in Nepal. In this backdrop, it is clear that Nepali nationalism has weakened because of its inherent flaws.

A brief history of Nepali Media

The arrival of 'Giddhe Press' from England in 1851 AD marks the beginning of the era of printing press in Nepal. The first magazine published in Nepal was Sudhasagar back in 1898. In 1901 AD, Gorkhapatra came into existence as a weekly and revolutionized the domain of printing press entirely. However, the newspapers circulated then only served the interests of the regime and had nothing to do with raising the critical issues of the society.

In 1951, Radio Nepal came into existence with the oncoming of democracy under King Tribhuvan Shah following the end of Rana Regime. The democratic period lasted up to 1951-1960 AD. During this period, the first ever Nepali language film was screened titled "Satya Harischandra", the first non-governmental Nepali weekly literary magazine was published titled "Jagaran" and the first non-governmental Nepali daily was published titled "Awaj". The referendum of 1980 between a reformed Panchayat system and a multi-party system was turned out to be in the favour of Panchayat system. Subsequently, several works of media development took place. Nepal Press Institute was established in 1984. Nepal Television began its broadcast in the year of 1985. However, the critical issues of the society particularly concerning the minorities were treated as if they never existed. Moreover, the Panchayat regime was adept in using media for political socialization of the citizens and to disseminate dominant discourses.

The restoration of democracy in the year 1990 was unprecedentedly fruitful for the media. Ever since, media has progressed quantitatively. In 1992, a separate Press Council Act was promulgated to establish Press Council that can function in line with the democratic changes. Print journalism took a new turn in 1993 with the launch of two dailies 'Kantipur' in Nepali language and 'The Kathmandu Post' in English language³. Newsmagazines like Himal Khabarpatrika, Bimochan, Sadhana, etc came out. The constitution of 1990 also paved way for the

opening of radio to non-state sector. Radio Sagarmatha became the first non-state owned radio not only in Nepal but in the entire South Asian region⁶. However, Nepali media never deviated from the parochial nationalism that was nurtured under the Panchayat regime.

King Gyanendra Shah assumed direct authority in the year of 2005 dissolving the parliament and dismantling the constitution citing the inability of the parties to give stability to the nation-state. He put several restrictions on media activities by declaring emergency and arrested journalists in case of non-compliance. The journalists were banned from writing about political parties. The military enforced censorship took toll on all forms of media like newspapers, magazines, radios, etc. The national media somewhat became the mouthpiece of the regime.

On 2006, King Gyanendra stepped down from direct rule in response to the protracted street protests and reinstated the parliament. Many restrictions on media imposed by him immediately were lifted and a new era of media boom began. Monarchy was abolished in 2008 by the newly elected CA and the country changed course radically towards republic. Similarly, the hitherto Hindu Kingdom was also replaced by a Secular state. The post-Gyanendra Nepal has seen immense proliferation of TV channels including full-time news channels. News channels like Avenues (2007), Sagarmatha TV (2007), ABC (2008), News 24 (2010), among others, were established.

Nepali vs Nepalese

Harka Gurung distinguishes 'Nepali' and 'Nepalese' by using the former term to refer to the lingua franca of the country and the latter term to refer to "the people and the other aspects"². Similarly, the publisher's note of the Martin Chautari published monograph 'to be a Nepalese' written by CK Lal clarifies the use of 'Nepali' to refer to "Nepali language and the other" and meanwhile to connote "exclusionary and narrow sense of elite and state-sponsored Nepali identity" whereas 'Nepalese', on the other hand, is used to refer to diverse population of Nepal that connotes inclusiveness and plurality⁷. The monograph by CK Lal dwells on the need to redefine 'Nepalipani' or Nepalese identity as per the aspirations and experiences of the peoples of Nepal. He stresses the need of an accommodative Nepalese identity instead of an assimilative form of nationality. He, however, notes that it is dangerous to demolish the established notion of 'Nepalipani' altogether as it may create identity crisis and suggests to transform established notion of 'Nepalipani' into inclusive 'Nepaliness' or 'Nepaliyata'.

Media vis-à-vis Nationalism

Media's traditional role to forge so-called 'national integration' based on the old model of Nepali nationalism has lost its legitimacy. There has been a lot of hue and cry in the media that Nepali nationalism is at stake owing to identity movements. Susan Hagen and Mahendra Lawoti identify two kinds of

nationalism: state-centric nationalism and people-centric nationalism⁸. According to them, state-centric nationalism is the exclusionary Nepali nationalism and on the other hand, people-centric nationalism comes into existence in response to state-centric nationalism. They use the term 'ethnic conflict' to refer to the interplay of these two kinds of nationalism. Ethnic movements, they argue, try to make 'Nepaliness' accommodative and fair. Since identity movements are not taken in a positive light by the mainstream media, the 'Nepaliness' which they are aspiring to is also being misunderstood.

During Panchayat era, the policy of "one language, one dress and one culture" was initiated. As mass media is a powerful tool of socialization, radio was extensively employed by the regime so as to nurture a common Nepali identity. Later on, other forms of media also served the purpose as they came into existence. Bhattachan argues that mass media indoctrinate people with dominant ideologies and try to manufacture consent on the dominant discourses⁴. The idea of homogeneity was extensively diffused during the Panchayat period through mass media to capture the peoples' imagination.

Even after the re-establishment of multi-party democracy in 1990, the political parties made no effort to redefine 'Nepaliness' to reflect the heterogeneity of the population. Mass media assumed the role of an obstructor when different non-Hindu ethnic groups took to the streets demanding the inclusion of secularism in the forthcoming constitution⁹. Contrary to the popular demand, the constitution of 1990 declared Nepal as a Hindu state and thus, emboldened many non-Hindu activists against the exclusionary state. Maoist insurgency that started in 1996 was still marginal until it raised the issues of the marginalized in the so-called people's war.

Following the second people's movement in 2006, the Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007 was promulgated wherein Nepal is recognized as a secular country. Even mainstream media now more or less appears to be comfortable with the secular ideas, which indicates that media has finally come to terms with the rationality of secularism in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious society. Secularism can be considered as a preliminary exercise to broaden Nepalese identity. However, the recent political developments in Nepal do not bode well. The rightist forces have visibly gained ground and have started organized mobilization across the country in their bid to challenge secularism, bring back Monarchy and quash the achievements of the people's movement.

National integration and Media

National integration can be achieved through various strategies. Swarupa Rajagopalan identifies 5 ways by which a state can integrate its diverse population: segregation, hegemony, assimilation, synthesis and pluralism¹⁰. Segregation and hegemony are actually exclusive whereas assimilation, synthesis

and pluralism are integrative strategies. Noting that it is a herculean task to forge perfect integration through any of the strategies, Rajagopalan notes that exclusive strategies engender exclusivist responses whereas inclusive strategies engender responses of both kinds. The assimilative strategy adopted by Nepal has generated ethnic conflicts because the state identified itself with the dominant community by neglecting others. Pluralism is now the buzzword and the Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007 is a promising point of departure. Pluralism, however, is not merely the recognition of diversity but also the acknowledgement of equal status of every ethnic group. Therefore, pluralism is to be reflected in every sector including media.

Popular pluralistic slogans like 'unity in diversity' often find space in media. The country's national anthem has also been changed to reflect the diversity of the country. The cultural costumes of different ethnic groups are officially recognized and can be worn in official ceremonies like convocation, etc. All these developments are definitely encouraging but they have not been institutionalized with a new inclusive constitution. Meanwhile, it is important to fashion an inclusive Nepali identity as per the changed socio-political landscapes. The established notion of 'Nepaliness' is embedded in political, cultural, religious, social and economical spheres of the country. Therefore, it is impossible to redefine Nepaliness in an effective way without undergoing structural changes. One of the major demands of identity movements is the same. As long as media in Nepal remains hostile to identity movements, the construction of an inclusive 'Nepaliness' may not be feasible. Media has the potential to play a crucial role in redefining Nepali nationalism so that it can resonate with the diverse population of the country and thereby strengthen national integration. However, mainstream media has evidently not played a constructive role in this regard.

Conclusion

In multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious country like Nepal, the role of media should be towards harmonizing the relationship among the diverse peoples. However, this has not been the case. Media needs to review its take on nationalism and should promote a revised inclusive nationalism rather than hanging on to the parochial nationalism of the Panchayat era. As a few privileged communities have access to media as well as the state institutions, they are reluctant to cover the issues and voices of various social and identity groups branding them as 'communal' or threat to 'nationalism' because their activism has the potentiality to deprive them of their age-old privileges for the sake of equality.

In a diverse society, media should play an integrative role. The media's inability to reconcile itself to the changing socio-political landscapes has made its role contentious in Nepal. Media has undoubtedly an immense power that can be unleashed for the betterment of society and the country at large.

But for that to happen, mass media should accommodate the issues of all peoples as equal citizens. Ideally, media is to maintain its neutrality at all times. To that end, inclusiveness in media is one of the prerequisites. The various identity groups have become more vocal about their rights than ever, the media should see this as an opportunity where they can play an effective role in bridging the gap between the agitators and the state. The public sphere should be more accommodative so as to give space to varied opinions and views. If it is so, media can play a facilitating role for nation-building and strengthening democracy in the country.

References

1. Gellner E., Nations and nationalism. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1983)
2. Gurung H., Nepal Social Demography and Expressions. Kathmandu: New Era (2001)
3. Onta P., The print media in Nepal since 1990: Impressive Growth and Institutional Challenges. *Studies in Nepali, History and Society*, 6(2), 331-336 (2001)
4. Bhattachan K.B., Culture and Communication. In P. Kharel (Ed.), *Media in society*, (pp 93-114). Kathmandu: Nepal Press Institute (2002)
5. Lee J.K., Press Freedom and National Development: Towards a Reconceptualization. *Gazette*, 48, 149-163 (1991)
6. Kharel P., Media Speaks in Contents. Gorkhapatra.org.np. Retrieved from http://www.gorkhapatra.org.np/rising.detail.php?article_id=46687&cat_id=7 (2011)
7. Lal CK., To be a Nepalese. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari (2012)
8. Hangen S. and Lawoti M., Introduction: Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal. In M. Lawoti and S. Hagen (Eds.), *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal* (pp 05-30). London and New York: Routledge (2013)
9. Lawoti M., Media and Conflict, The Kathmandu Post. Retrieved from <http://www.ekantipur.com/2009/10/23/related-article/media-and-conflict/301876.html> (2009)
10. Rajagopalan S., State and Nation in South Asia. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited (2006)