

Meeting the Challenge in South Asia: Journalists push the boundaries

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Societies in transition pose both challenges and threats to the practice of journalism. South Asia is no exception to this.

The entire South Asian region is in ferment today. Where else is it more evident than in Nepal where the transition is so palpable and where each dawn exposes a new avenue, a new perspective and an unexpected change?

Although the change is most dramatic in Nepal, it is not the only society that is in transition in South Asia. The democracy deficit is evident in a greater or lesser degree in most countries of the region.

In addition, there are conflicts rooted in competing nationalisms (between India and Pakistan, for example, and between India and Bangladesh). There are conflicts over sharing of resources (over the sharing of river waters, sharing of ocean resources because maritime boundaries are not clearly defined) and sharing of political power -- as reflected in internal conflicts based on ethnic, regional and sub-regional groupings (there are estimated to be more than 80 insurgencies along the Himalayan belt from Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh in the east). And there are conflicts over external borders between nations.

Journalists in South Asia are caught in the contested terrain between the forces of status quo and the forces of change. Narrow nationalism tells you to withdraw within the territorial boundaries. The market tells you to globalize, transcend the territorial boundaries.

By our reportage we journalists also become mediators and facilitators in discourses of conflict within our own countries and across the neighbourhood. By our representation of events and conflicts we set the terms in which people think about these conflicts.

The vested interests of status quo; the dominant elite and the State, have immense power to seduce and to terrorize journalists to conform, to be partisans of stability and predictability in social and political processes and to become propagators of their ideology and their world view. They have the power to co-opt, to reward, to make you a partner in the benefits of status quo. At the same time, there are the forces of change that beckon and as daily chroniclers of history journalists cannot ignore them.

Under such circumstances what does journalists pushing the boundaries mean? It means keeping the door open for negotiated compromises and peaceful settlements. It means depicting the problems of each party to a dispute with fairness, and representing each side as having genuine concerns.

Nation states in South Asia have tended to convert their external boundaries into instruments of defining their nationalism. The boundary between nations as a site of contending nationhoods and identities is evident most starkly in the case of India and Pakistan and in the

case of India and Bangladesh. In both cases boundaries are sites of immense potential for conflict.

So strong is the idea of boundaries as water-tight divisions of identities that the surest way of making an enemy of a Pakistani for an Indian is to say that we are the same people divided by an artificially created border.

Cross-border migration, which is greater from Bangladesh to India than the reverse, is used to demonize and criminalize the economic migrants.

How does the media negotiate these boundaries? To an extent we have witnessed a greater movement of journalists across national boundaries and reporting from the neighbourhood whether it was the democracy movement in Nepal or the continuing ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Journalists, despite restrictions, are traveling frequently across boundaries to report much more than they did earlier.

The mushrooming growth of TV channels and improved access, sometimes over the telephone, to key actors and analysts in each other's country has meant that relatively more balanced reporting is taking place than earlier. Boundaries that were never crossed are being crossed frequently.

However, our mental boundaries and mental maps can still remain narrowly nationalistic. And often they do. More often than not, the interpretation of events across national boundaries is still within a framework of competitive nationalism (e.g. the Kashmir issue, the Sir Creek maritime boundary dispute, the Mahakali Treaty between India and Nepal, the Ganga Water Treaty between India and Bangladesh).

And the net result is that the death of a feudal, exceptionally violent and essentially a tribal tyrant, Nawab Akbar Bugti, is described as a "tragic loss" by journalists in India unquestioningly. Instead of mulling over why the Baloch nationalist movement has to rely on a feudal and obscurantist leadership, it is just much easier to convert an enemy of the current Pakistani establishment into a hero after a briefing by the Foreign Office.

Journalists can use neutral words while reporting on the water sharing or trade disputes between India and its neighbours instead of becoming unnecessarily jingoistic. They can help convert border resources into sites of co-operation rather than of contention and conflict.

It is because we accept the foreign policy and national security paradigms of our respective countries unquestioningly that a "militant" agitating for a political cause becomes a "terrorist", an economic migrant becomes a dangerous "infiltrator" and an independent Tamil newspaper editor not towing the line of the establishment becomes a "Tiger agent". And areas where there is a Maoist movement get to be described as "Naxalite-infested" – an outbreak of a pestilence.

When journalists adopt and internalize the language of the State and the dominant elite, they tacitly also accept the assumptions underlying that language. With that comes an entire perspective that makes present day adversaries into permanent irreconcilable enemies.

Consider a few examples.

In Sri Lanka, for example, if one looks at the reporting of the war in the north and the east, the Sinhala media has no report of what is happening to the people in those regions. It is

only a numbers game for them – how many dead and how many injured. There are no human-interest stories, no soft stories, nothing about what has happened to the lives of the people because of the 15-years of blockade imposed on them because they live in Tamil areas by the Sri Lankan army.

Leave alone batteries for torches and electric wires not even sanitary towels were allowed into the north and the east – they contained sterilized cotton which the Sri Lankan army thought could be used by the rebels. What did this do the people in these areas? There were no reports in the Sinhala media on this. Sinhala nationalism obliterated the “other” – the Tamils, and refused to recognize them as human beings.

The story is no different of the Tamil media in Sri Lanka. It is the mirror image of its Sinhala counterpart. Instead of crossing boundaries, Sri Lankan media has become parochial, partisan of the ethnic identities it represents. It has become inward looking and narrowly confined.

In Nepal during the Emergency, the media started using the official terminology – every act of the Maoists was a “terrorist” act and every security person dead was a “shaheed” or a martyr. The communities and the places destroyed by the army were not described sympathetically. There was resistance but by and large there was a peculiar takeover of the media space, in terms of editorial policy, slant of stories and the language used.

When the Indian and the Pakistani media report on the contentious issues between them, they become extremely jingoistic. It is difficult to say where the propaganda of the respective Foreign Offices ends and journalism begins. However, one has to admit that by and large the Pakistani media is less prone to pushing the foreign policy line of the government than its Indian counterpart. The manner in which the Pakistani media held the establishment accountable for the Kargil debacle has no parallel across the border in India.

Journalists in South Asia with its multitude of religions, ethnicities, and cultural diversity need to problematise these issues. This is particularly important at a time when technological progress has shortened the response time of journalists. The near-immediate coverage by a TV channel or radio about a riot, a bomb blast, or an ongoing dialogue over resources or borders, sets the ground for further perception and engagement with the issue (e.g. depiction of conflict between BSF and BDR on India-Bangladesh border, description of Mumbai serial train blast suspects as Muslims and not as terrorists).

When we ascribe motives in our attempt to quickly put an identifiable face on terrorism – whether it is Al Qaida, Lashkar-e-Tayyeba, Harkat-ul-Jehadi Islami (HUJI), Maoists, Naxalites or Tamil Tigers – we should ask ourselves are we not accepting the language of our respective security establishments?

The paradigm shift that took place after 9/11 has changed our vocabulary. Often it suits those who control the levers of State power to accept such changes. Was the attempt to militarily deal with the Maoists in Nepal not projected by King Gyanendra as part of a global war on terrorism? I don't need to ask you whether that was a correct description of the events unfolding in Nepal.

It is a major challenge for journalists in South Asia to be more guarded in their reportage, to use neutral words and political categories rather than a language that seeks to accuse, criminalize and exclude.

If we don't do this, we will end up bolstering the biases and interests of our national security establishments.

Shades of gray are preferable to a black and white one when it is difficult to find clarity. By totalizing too quickly, by being definitive in our reporting rather than tentative, are we not endangering the lives of innocent Muslims, Tamils or Kashmiris by our broad-brush descriptions which may have no basis in reality?

One must remember that journalism is rooted in the liberal tradition and stands for expanding freedom. The democracy deficit in our countries can be reduced by expanding democracy, by journalists reporting in a manner that strengthens democratic institutions and democratic movements. If we uncritically adopt the state's agenda -- the agenda of the "Haves" -- who will speak for the "have-nots"?

Nor should journalists blindly follow elitist arguments. This was demonstrated in the rabid opposition one witnessed in the media in India in defence of the so-called meritocracy.

Newspapers have joined the chorus with a vocal elite against positive discrimination in admission to professional educational institutions and in state-employment for the economically and socially backward classes. We should not be tempted to side with status quo on issues of social justice.

One of the biggest problems in South Asia is of people displaced by the mega-development projects and those who have been marginalized by globalization. One finds that journalists adopt the simplistic argument that if there is a cost to be paid for development then so be it. Such an attitude can only suppress the voice of the weak and those who are forced to pay the cost of development but get no benefits in return.

Is it only an accident that the Maoist movement in Nepal found support in the Rapti Development Area or that the armed movement of Naxalites in India is growing in the mineral and resource rich states of Jharkhand and Chattisgarh where the tribals feel not only left out but also cheated by the State? Why is it that the suicide rate among the cotton farmers of India has risen so dramatically, the government has been forced to think of some patchwork relief packages?

Journalists must cross the boundaries of national and state perspectives in all these conflict situations. One of my editors was fond of advising his reporters at loggerheads with the establishment, "Tell them that as a journalist you are neither from India nor from Pakistan. You come from Mars. And then report."

This is perfectly good advice in the South Asian context. And acting on it is the real challenge.

It is a challenge for journalists in South Asia to give a voice to these marginalized sections of our societies and not be in a hurry to accept unquestioningly the development models presented to us. Just as there are many truths, there are many ways of looking at development. We must not rule them out *ab initio* at the behest of the dominant voices.

However, one must also admit that there are moments when the media can quite legitimately cross over from neutrality and objectivity to partisanship. This happened in the Jan Andolan phase Nepal. The Nepalese media challenged the King both in their newspapers and on the street. Reporting was very pro-people and newspapers, radio stations and TV channels pushed the democratic agenda. A new kind of mobilization of the media took place and even

the Royal Nepal Army as it was then called, started treating the media in Nepal as a force-multiplier of the Maoists.

Today the practitioners of journalism are better educated, better trained and more professional. Ten to fifteen years ago it would difficult to have people as educated, as politically sensitive as you in a room together.

Yet in our journalism today the multiplicity of voices is lost. There is no openness of dialogue. That is the space – a space for a wide variety of views, for dialogue, for a gaggle of voices – that we as journalists have to reclaim and expand.

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