

Media: the fast track to change, peace¹

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Media reports both: social change and peace. In doing so, the media participates in their pursuit and contributes at the same time to their value and cause. The duo gets energized and finds impressive extension through the media's long arm, which represents the unique power of reaching the mass covering the whole of society. This opens an opportunity for people in general to learn about change and peace, add value to them individually or collectively by participating in the way they like and benefit personally from them.

All three components – media, society and peace – appear, on surface, to be isolated pastures. They, however, are closely interlinked committed to man the process of change in peace for the benefit of all in the society. Some would prefer to call them three in one or one in three forms. The way they blend determines the effectiveness of all. As and when they fail to mix up, societies begin to encounter the Tsunami. It is at this point of time that their equilibrium gets shocked and rocked.

Analyzing the universe of academic landscape of media over time one could conclude: media is a **social tool** to transmit information based on obsessive facticity, and neutrality of attitude. (Various media scholars like Tuchman consider this as equivalent of media professional ideology.)

Social change, when viewed against the backdrop of its history, refers to a type of ongoing **process** that gets refueled by nature or humans and remains subject to manipulation any time by series of factors. (Sociologists in general prefer to take social change as change in social structure, nature, and behaviour of institutions and people. Some love to attach it specifically to one event or action while others find in it a synonym for advocacy for the issue of transforming society economically, politically or socially.)

Peace has presented itself as a **climate** in which all can function smoothly and without being disturbed physically and mentally. It refers to "a societal ecology marked by absence of violent move." (R.K.Regmee's working paper presented on Aug 22, 2005 Godavari seminar) Like environment, it could be sustained, built, or protected. The same could be disturbed, polluted or damaged. In the former situation, everything may have guaranteed positivity essential for survival, development and growth while in the latter everything may go negative, wrong, anarchic, or wild.

This paper takes the triple concepts – Media, Social Change and Peace Building – as a social gadget being used for a process undertaken in a climate. Translated into Nepali reality, it is Nepali media being functional in the act of reporting social changes brought about in the country over the past two years and a half which mark comparatively more peaceful times after decade – long conflict.

More specifically, one could say it is the study of what Nepali media did during the period. The realistic statement would be: the media – print, radio, TV and online – narrated mainly varied

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dimensions of the story of the joint political movement against the direct rule of the king, the success of the People's Movement II, restoration of parliament, formation of Movement – inspired - coalition - government, promulgation of Interim Constitution, Maoists entry into government, parliament, successful completion of Constituent Assembly poll, implementation of the people's mandate through the CA decisions on switching over to Republic and giving practical shape to pillars of State.

Key changes

The events have produced waves after waves directly or indirectly triggering a number of changes in Nepali society. They in turn modified various equations of power, and decision making process besides compelling several practices to evolve or fade out. Some of the top ten key changes² affecting the society could be listed below:

- **Top decision making power gets transferred from special elite Narayanhity Royal Palace to commoners' arena - Baluwatar, the Prime Minister's residence + Singha Durbar, the seat of government of Nepal**
- **The army changes its traditional "loyal" role - backing king - to "national" duty - defense of the country**
- **Ideologically polarized parties forget their differences and work out a functional alliance for achieving PM II mission**
- **Peace Accord brings Maoists into political mainstream and discontinues conflict**
- **Insurgents become parliamentarians, earn politicians' trust in their commitment to democracy and disenchantment with arms**
- **Government's focused attempt to hold CA poll in a democratic manner**
- **People's participation in CA election and handover special mandate - leadership to Maoists, second, third positions to NC and CPN UML**
- **Beginning of Republican Era guaranteeing citizens' right to rule inspiring people of various places, minorities and excluded to speak out their grievances**
- **Peaceful transfer of power to one time armed rebels through parliamentary process**
- **Continued international support for PM II and all events following it**

Thanks to the changes, almost all institutions of the State – Executive, Legislative, Judiciary, Security Organs, Press, Civil Society, Professional Bodies, Non-government Bodies, Political Parties, Religious Institutions, Educational Centres, Private Sector, Markets, Trade – Industry – Entrepreneur Sectors and Communities have felt the need to transform or readjust their positions or policies or practices. On top and at the center, the feeling is shared by all. The peripheral or grass-root, however, appears completely untouched by it.

Progressive politicians describe the phenomenon as a journey into New Nepal. Scholars love to observe it as a case of paradigm swing, a remarkable shift in philosophical bedrock. Revolutionaries term it the "gift of martyrs." Activists smell in it the people -aroma which is

² Developed on the basis of contemporary media coverage in Kathmandu Valley through quality research method of selection, short-listing and categorizing

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popular among commoners of Nepal. Analysts explain it as interim period signed by changes but not cleared by destination.

Like in all situations of change, there is confusion in the society. A number of past practices have been dropped but their replacements for the present have not been designed yet. Actors of change have varied style of working, some of them highly contradicting and others dangerously incompatible. Some talk change but don't practice it when they have an opportunity to act.

Chaotic confusion

Some ten confusions producing serious hullabaloo could be listed below as examples³ which provide some sense of the contemporary din:

- **Political parties which benefited positively through alliance culture for two years decide to undo the consensus approach after CA poll**
- **Maoists who got crowned with political trophy through two years' peace and parliamentary election process advocate in the parliament against the parliamentary system**
- **Advocates of equal opportunities for all forget the marginalized, suppressed, and oppressed when they get positions of power**
- **The Constituent Assembly which has to produce a fresh Constitution for Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal in two years does not take initial step towards the direction for first six months; it concentrates only on legislative jobs**
- **Ruling parties play opposition role; show no new trend in processing of government policy/programme, budget in CA; feel no need to stop forces parallel to state**
- **All commit to peace and people; but contribute to disturb both either through conflict –time practices or innovative methods of protesting or civil disobedience and ignore armed neo-conflict in various areas specially southern belt of the country**
- **Most refer to conflict victims, martyrs but most ignore their need particularly that of the families of the disappeared, the maimed, and the looted**
- **All advocate service – oriented politics but exercise power – centred one**
- **None disregards economy and private sector but none cares to make highways regularly operational and treat sick industrial plants**
- **All pay lip service to youths but do nothing to empower them, or depoliticize educational institutions or avoid unemployment**

Neo-conflict

Is Nepal out of conflict at present? The question could be relevant specially in the midst of chaotic confusion. Nowhere in the society is peace, they say hinting at several indicators of disturbance in the Tarai, hills, mountains, urban centres, and highways. The movements in Tarai, the demand for separate federal state with power of self decision by minorities, and other communities indicate: if their grievances are not addressed properly in time, another round of

³ Collection from latest developments on the basis of quality research prioritizing

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multi-dimensional conflict is sure to open in the country. Use of arms and practice of underground political tactics feature some of their activities which possess the real danger.

A number of protests could be witnessed daily in various places. All of them disturb public life, governance, law and order. The government cannot simply act for public good. Although the country has transferred into Republic, people have not been able to have its taste in their life. Corruption is eroding the foundation of society; criminals are challenging its existence; political misunderstandings sometimes threaten return to full fledged conflict.

The voice raised in the course of movements and protests is genuine. For decades the communities were neglected, ignored, and not respected by the state. They had to feel like refugees in their own country because of extreme suppression, deprivation, and discrimination of sorts. With freedom restored and entry into republicanism well confirmed, they would like to secure their place, position and say in the country. If they do not become actively vocal today – the time of restructuring of state, they fear they might lose yet another opportunity of having a real existence in the nation.

Had the political parties been able to represent their voice in a confident manner, communities would not have come forward in this way. But in absence of a gap in representation and advocacy, the communities themselves have made themselves active. Similarly had the post – conflict reconciliation and compensation been undertaken for the wounded, disappeared, de-propertyed, and sufferers of sorts the neo-conflict would not have been that serious.

Media – behaviour

Media's behaviour in this situation of neo-conflict is something that deserves close study. It could be categorized into five as mentioned below:

- plain reporting
- advocating the cause of some and not others in a partisan way
- acting as a pressure group in selective cases
- facilitating the political parties
- serving as a tool for fair public communication

Unlike in the past media in general reports them widely and regularly. In a way it has served as a safety valve for society to offer outlet for public dissatisfaction. All sorts of events get coverage but the response to it is not encouraging. The trend of media covering problems and authority ignoring them is going on for quite some time. Informed persons assure saying "this is a characteristic feature of post-conflict times."

Because of the public communication made available by media about the grievances of several communities in the republican era, the protests have not been highly explosive and disastrous. If the media had not ventilated voice through plain reporting, things would have gone out of control well before the Constituent Assembly poll and series of things would have gone wrong resulting ultimately in a failed state.

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The media, however, has not been able to be a fair watchdog and has not pursued the principles of ABC of journalism in all cases and in all places. Because of its failure to report properly and fairly, the media itself has been victimised at the hand of some movement – people. "The trend of punishing the media people on the spot and anywhere in the workplace has over time been spreading like wild fire," say media analysts referring to the incidents of offense against press. Some have been compelled to say "today Nepali press is free but reporting is not; the latter is under constant threat."

The option for media

The option for media in neo – conflict situation is limited, but, fortunately, the same is not confusing. Intensifying the public communication in a fair and non-partisan manner, the media could prepare political parties to be more responsive to the grievances of people and serve their voice and aspirations with due respect and recognition. In the process it could create public opinion for building confidence in bodies which have to provide governance and ensure law and order.

For this the media should earn public trust for itself by serving the people well. As an important pillar of the state the media has to be effortful in building a positive public opinion through fair flow of information about the restructuring of the state and making provision for federalism.

The restructuring of state this time should not be discriminatory as in the past. Every Nepali should have a place of honour and recognition in it. To create the atmosphere media could initiate the nation wide dialogue through its outlets.

The basic mechanism that media could use for the purpose is the news room and production wing. It could inspire them to be effortful towards this direction. Their productions would ultimately build peace, create a climate in the country in which a fair constitution could be scribbled. All Nepalis would have recognition, honour and opportunity to participate in national affairs on an equal footing through the constitution.

Bottleneck for leading peace to logical end

The changes mentioned above are not being facilitated because of the confusions following them. The situation has served as a bottleneck for not allowing peace to reach a logical end. If this obstruction continues for long, the achievements of the past two years might be lost and another round of conflict may affect the country. That is why the media today should be effortful in consolidating the past gain, institutionalizing the change, and chart a fast track avoiding the block between the country and sustainable peace.

The issue of building peace is very complicated but is not beyond human capacity, they say adding "a well- thought and well implemented peace programme could institutionalize peace on a permanent basis. Whether the task should pursue top down approach or bottom up depends on circumstances. In many cases both should be followed in a blended manner."

The issue of adopting an effective approach to building peace within a population has kept scholars and communicators busy for long. Some have forwarded Communication Skill

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Approach to promote peace. Others have suggested Sulha practice. John Paul Lederach, in *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997), 39 has prescribed a peace-building pyramid that has three levels: the top elite, the middle ranges and the grassroots.

Borrowing guidelines from the prescription Nepali media could contribute to the cause of social change and peace. They could develop a working mechanism in this regard in their newsroom and production wing.

Table 1: Working mechanism

Task	Information	Opinion	Empowerment	Remarks
Consolidating gain	News, follow-ups	Investigative highlights	Audience - engagement	Periodic basis Print/audio/visual
Institutionalizing change	Introducing concept	Updating exercises	Skill transmission	Regular cycle Print/audio/visual
Charting a fast track to peace	Case study of disappeared, victims, wounded	Discussion Pressure group coverage	Compensation Reconciliation	State, community, citizen – level Print/audio/visual

The above Table stresses specifies task in the first column: consolidating gain, institutionalizing change and charting a fast track to peace. It intends to spread information on them through various tools mentioned in the second column. The third is on forming public opinion in various ways on the trio. The fourth concentrates on empowerment through myriad ways. The fifth sheds light on the timing and type of media presentation.

The newsroom and production wing of media houses could build their own schedule targeting readers, listeners, viewers and netizens on the basis of the working mechanism. The outcome of such programme would be an informed citizenry capable of making change and peace sustainable. The media would be doing a great service to both through the process.

The mechanism demands active and uninterrupted participation from media with a sense of service and dedication to the cause of building New Nepal. It also requires some more additional financial resources and person power.

Will media houses be ready to do those things by adopting or adapting the mechanism for making a difference in their services in changing times?

The End

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