State of Alternative Media in South Asia: with Special Reference to India, Shrilanka and Nepal

Abstract

Alternative media is known as movement against the monopolization of media space and time by a few media giants and against media deregulation. It is dedicated to democratization of communication. It is a form of protest against a minority pretending to represent the voices of the majority.

This paper examines the state of Alternative Media and the role played by it in giving voice to different segments of society in three South Asian countries namely India, Shrilanka and Nepal.

The study has revealed that Though the concept of alternative media's seems new in South Asian region, the role it has played in uplifting of grassroot and marginalized people in proves that there is huge scope for such media to bridge the gap between people of mainstream society and the people of marginalized society.

Keywords: Alternative Media, Mainstream Media, Democratisation Of Communication, Community Radio, Television, Tabloid, Newspaper.

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Introduction

Alternative media should be defined by rediscovering the purpose of mass communication. It is conceded that neither the government nor the mainstream media have much respect for public opinion. In the given situation, alternative media is defined broadly as those media practices falling outside the mainstream of corporate communication (Dasu and Joseph 2003).

Diverse backgrounds are responsible for the emergence of alternative media in South Asian nations. They also have different constraints and challenges which sometimes create impediments in their smooth functioning.

Objectives of the Study

This paper has the following objectives:

1. Explore the prospects and challenges of Alternative Media in three South Asian nations i.e. India, Srilanka and Nepal.
2. Understand the role of Alternative Media in raising voice for the marginalized segment of the society.
3. Examine various type of Alternative media in these countries.
4. Analyse government's attitude towards these media in these countries.

Alternative Media in India

Ashish Sen (2007) argues, that three factors play key role in discussing the community media/radio scene in India:

1. The co-relation between Media Reform, Inclusiveness and Equity.
2. The co-relation between Media Reform, Globalization, Development and the Millennium Development Goals.
3. The co-relation between Media Reform and Technology (Sen 2007: 29).

The co-relation between Media Reform, Inclusiveness and Equity

India's landscape, in many ways, reveals a gallery of stark and daunting contrasts. Socio-economic divides are compounded by a formidable diversity of languages, dialects and cultures. In such a scenario, the potential for community media should assume critical significance. Unfortunately, the government remains to walk its talk of equitable media reform, and community voices struggle at the periphery of a media landscape which is confronted by inequity and exclusion.

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Noted economist Sen, in his widely discussed work on the causes of famine, makes a compelling case demonstrating that free access to communications and media is vital and an "effective preventor of such human disasters, because an informed population will be able to learn and therefore address the causes of food shortage, almost always a problem of distribution, rather than one of supply". Thus, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) also outlined the significance of communication among grassroot people. In this backdrop, *Indian Cabinet approved, in November 2006, the licensing of community radio stations run by non-profit organisations with a record of at least three years of social service to the community.* (Sen 2007: 30).

Media Reforms and Communications Technology

The imbalance between the pace of communications technology and communications reform has proven to be double-edged and has redefined the relationship between public, private and community domains. If it has aggravated the issue of inequity, it has also highlighted the vulnerability of access (Ibid: 31). Though development of new technology brought revolution in the world of information and communication, their distribution is driven largely by market forces, creating "a growing digital divide between the haves and the have-nots". Nevertheless, the pace of technological growth today has underlined the reverse side of globalisation and emphasised that small needs not only be beautiful, but also powerful. Taking this fact into account, the community radio in the form of alternative made breakthrough in India. After virtually a decade of lobbying, the Government, in 2003, allowed residential educational institutions to apply for licenses for community radio stations. However, community radio, as it is practiced in other parts of the world, remains to see the light of day (Sen 2007: 32).

Alternative Media in Sri Lanka

The concept of alternative media has been with the Sri Lankan communities for generations. We can easily trace it back to colonial era. When we look at the reasons and rationales behind the emergence of alternative media projects, two clear models can be identified.

Firstly as the alternative stream of information and expression against the (especially state-controlled) mainstream media networks (Tilakawardana 2007: 215). The early structures of this model can be seen during the colonial era which came as an alternative way of communication against the colonial imperialistic repression. The locals used various strategies like street dramas, folk dramas, posters and poetry papers with coded messages in the local language in addition to tabloids, which was the only mass communication medium available for the locals at the time. These forms of media were used to inform the fellow countrymen about the misdeeds of colonial authorities, their cruelty, crimes against humanity committed against local people and also to criticize their way of governance and mismanagements. Further more these media were used to rally the people against colonial rule and facilitate the struggle against freedom (Tilakawardana

2007: 216). This model of alternative media was practiced even after the fall of colonial rule by the political activist or militants who fought against the national government and other organizations or by the groups of people who are critical of the government and are excluded from the mainstream media. This form of media movements are strongest at times when the national government represses freedom of expression and take an authoritarian stand over mainstream media. The people use these media to get a balance view since the mainstream media is heavily under government control, not practicing media pluralism at any level. These models of alternative media movements are highly aggressive, radical and extremely critical about the government policies, multinational entities and capitalistic ideologies (Tilakawardana 2007: 217).

The radical media movements were most active in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s to some extend. This was the time when Sri Lanka had two political uprisings in the south. Furthermore until early 1990s the government of Sri Lanka held the monopoly over electronic media. There was only one radio station-Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), two television channels-Independent Television Network (ITN) and Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC), all owned by the Sri Lankan government. There were four national level newspaper companies from which one-Associated Newspaper Corporation Limited (ANCL) is state controlled. This media environment in the country created space for alternative media to keep the balance and pluralism in views and ideologies. The forms of media used at the time were posters, tabloids, mobile-loudspeakers' and audio tapes containing news and information. But most popular were the tabloids published by various groups and organizations with different views and ideologies (Tilakawardana 2007: 218).

In the early 1990s the national government started to relax the law on media, which was the trend in many Asian countries at the time. As a result, private channels started to emerge adding pluralism to the local media sphere. At the same time, the group involved in the two political uprisings in the south decided to join the mainstream politics and contested for the parliament. This new political and media landscape has not had a considerable space for alternative media movements in the form of radical media. The general public stopped consuming such media, since it was not appealing as it was before, and the market for such media (especially tabloids) hit rock bottom.

Secondly, the other model of alternative media included the media projects which are run by government organizations or NGOs with support of the local government. These types of media projects cover social and development issues mostly catering to rural and/or minority communities. Compared to radical media, the social development model of alternative media is less aggressive and less politicized in content, and in general they have a public service aspect. They deal with issues such as education, advocacy and awareness on social development and public health, conflict resolution and

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ethnic harmony, etc. These projects are mainly funded by the national government or the international development agencies. The history of this model of alternative media is relatively short. The initial projects of this nature can be identified through the regional radio station setup by the central government under Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, such as Mahaveli Community Radio, initiated as joint ventures between the Sri Lankan government and international development agencies (Tilakawardana 2007: 219).

The only alternative television project that fits in to this model of alternative media is the Young Asia Television, which was initiated in the mid-1990s. In general the social and political alternative media space of Sri Lanka has become commercialized (Tilakawardana 2007: 220).

The later model of alternative media also provided entertainment to the people parallel with information of social and developmental issues. (Tilakawardana 2007).

Emerging Alternative Media in Nepal

It has been observed that, few alternative media emerged in Nepal after the political development of 1990, giving voice to those issues which were not given space in the mainstream media. In this context, the eminent media Personnel Bharat Dutta Koirala (2006) argues that "An alternative media is established in order to cover those subjects which has not been covered or given significance by mainstream media" (Basnet 2006: 24).

These media are known as alternative media or non-government media and they are quite rampant in Nepal. Popular magazines like *Himal* (bi-monthly), *Ashmita*, *Bikash* and Hakahaki are few examples of such type of media. These magazines publish those issues which are not included in the mainstream magazines or political party's magazines. These articles and issues are directly concerned with society. These magazines publish news and articles related to socio-economic and cultural status of the given society with great research and depth study.

Though these alternatives magazines stand parallel to the mainstream magazines in terms of their content, they were always ahead of the mainstream media in addressing those issues related to the marginalized segment of the society which otherwise were neglected by the mainstream media. However, they never intend to gain profit and they are sold in mainstream market with the sole purpose of reaching the common people. They function with the assistance of the donor agencies and wish to become independent. Though run with limited budget, they cover those issues which are not covered by the mainstream media in effective manner and used to provide intellectual insights for them (Basnet 2006: 25).

After the restoration of multi-party democracy in Nepal in 1990, it has been observed that not only the mainstream media under the private sector started to flourish, but also non-profitable media started to increase in great number. In 1991, the annual *Himal* magazine came out with its research oriented articles. *Ashmita* magazine which a private and family based non-profitable magazine came up with the objectives of raising the voice against gender inequality and gender discrimination. Various studies have revealed the fact that, alternative media function with a minimum investment in a limited area by constructing small target group in order to achieve particular aims and goals. In modern time, these media are functional in the empowerment of marginalized segment of the society, women to create awareness to them in order to promote their creativity and make them aware of their rights (Basnet 2006).

During the 1970s, a few development-oriented media personnel started to run small media in order to give priority to the issues of development and empowerment of backward caste and class of the society. To obtain this goal they started various types of media by targeting particular community on group with minimum investment. These included radio, television and newspapers. These media produced published or broadcasted various type of material according to the interest and requirement of targeted groups. The initiation of these development oriented media personnel also influenced women. At that time there was a huge trend of opening social organization by women for empowerment and development of women (Basnet 2006: 27).

Sustainability remains the number one challenge for alternative media in Nepal. Even though community radio has been the most empowering development of the media in Nepal, many stations had only barely begun to make up their operation costs when the operation rules changed in February 2005. The controls on the media after February 2005, especially the ban on news on radio, also took away the little advertising the stations had begun to generate. There are no firm studies but anecdotal evidences suggest that many stations were forced to cut back on news and current affairs staff as result. The government's discriminatory policy for distributing publicly paid advertisements also threatens to affect the FM stations.

Nepal's alternative media have devised various cost-sharing models for addressing the problem of sustainability, but these in turn depend, directly or indirectly, on donor funding, and are not fully reliable. For example, a radio could enter a co-production agreement with an NGO with funds for spreading awareness about HIV/AIDS (supported by a donor). The arrangement could last only as long as there are funds to pay for the awareness program. The alternative to this is reaching co-production agreements with government or local government organisations. The ability of radios to raise local advertising will be affected if the government continues the ban on news, the slot of choice for most advertisers (Bhattarai 2007).

Radios in the remote areas face more challenges because they face greater harassment by the local administration officials than those in the urban centres. Recounting the experience in Jumla, a promoter of the radio there told a visiting International Media Mission delegation in late March 2006 that there were instances when his station had to use "creative means" to avoid attracting the wrath of the local Army Major. The trick was to broadcast anything

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that could raise official eyebrows in the local dialect (Jumli), which officials coming from other districts do not understand.

Ownership and Accountability

There are also ownership and accountability issues related to local radio (or other alternative media forms) that have yet to come under public scrutiny. Often many of the private FM stations (and newspapers) in the districts (especially Palpa and Rupandehi) have a large number of shareholders (up to 50 or even more) while some NGOs running media operations may have very small memberships, therefore raising the question of accountability. Programming-wise, there are very little differences between a privately- owned and community- or cooperative-owned radio station in terms of the local, social issues they cover (Bhattarai 2007).

However, in terms of ownership and accountability, smaller NGO-run radio stations, especially those with restrictive membership, leave room for debate about who they are accountable to- their directors or members, or the public at large. Such stations argue that because they broadcast to the public they are accountable to them, which is true to a certain extent, but often donor support in local radio tends to be measured in terms of ownership, and tends to exclude the private media, not always fairly. *Radio Paschimanchal* in Palpa, for example, was caught in the crossfire between the Maoists and the army on 31 January 2006, where some of its broadcasting equipment was damaged. It could not approach donors for funding for the sole reason of being "privately owned", and had to eventually raise donations, from individual and from other civil society groups, to acquire the replacement parts.

The Community Radio Support Centre (CRSC) has attempted at designing a community radio ownership model and has also drafted a law to that effect.

The various forms of alternative media have been successful in Nepal largely due to the open environment that allowed them room for creativity. However, there have been some bright sparks here and there, blogging for example, and other more creative uses of the Internet- such as a group that is trying to promote a web-based mainstream news service, the Independent News Service. However, the long-term success of even these efforts would depend on an environment of openness, possible only in a democratic polity (Bhattarai 2007).

The general political environment is important because on that depends the availability of donor funding needed to support both start-ups and alternative media forms that are unable to pay for their upkeep. The cutbacks on donor support to Nepal after the February 2005 takeover by the King has affected the media because much of the funds (from donors to government) would have gone to organisations (local bodies and community groups) that would have engaged with the media in one way or another (Bhattarai 2007).

Similarly, the debate on aid versus democracy cuts both ways, and, either way, it is the poor and weak that eventually suffers, as there are no clear answers on what should be done. Therefore, there is the need to devise alternative financing mechanisms to support and sustain media that give a real voice to the people, especially during the difficult times. One such model could be calculated, but minimal engagement with the government as a strategy to maintain the leverage needed to bargain for operational space (and support) to the independent media, including the alternative forms. The other could be cutting off all relations with government-and making engagement contingent on the space it provides to alternative media forms-while continuing direct support to the media. Both the approaches have their positive and negative implications and have to be carefully planned before execution (Bhattarai 2007).

Conclusion

Non-mainstream media are, by nature, pro-people and pro-social change and progress and anti-business (or profitability), and therefore, would always need some form of support to enable them to stay operational. However, care must be taken to ensure that such media forms are not trapped in the cycle of donor dependency and from hijacking by donors to advocate their agenda. This can be achieved through devising ways that ensure a balance between local contributions and external support. The issues related to ownership and accountability would also have to be resolved as part of the process of arriving at a viable financing model-because at the end of the day it is the interest of the people who are not   heard has to be taken into account-and served.

Though, the concept of alternative media's seems newer in South Asian region, the role it has played in the upliftment of grassroot and marginalized people in different context proves that there is huge scope of such media, in this region to bridge the gap between people of mainstream society and the people of marginalized society.

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