

## Women and Media in Nepal

By Manju Thapa

The combination of infrastructure development, new technologies and peoples' wider access to these has accelerated the already pervasive influence of media to the extent that media has become a major factor in shaping one's ideas, values, concepts and behaviour. In Nepal, media witnessed a rapid development after the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990. The number of national dailies (in the Nepali vernacular and English, as well), magazines, and commercial and community radio stations has increased significantly. A privately owned satellite TV channel, Channel Nepal, has been launched alongside the state channel, Nepal Television (NTV). Just a few months ago, the government also allowed the installation and maintenance of independent TV channels. Since the adoption of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal in 1990, Nepali media has been practicing press freedom and the right to information that this enshrines, delivering both positive and negative information.



courtesy of Ms. Usha Tiwari

Airing of women's programme "Shakti" through Radio Sagarmatha FM102.4.

The coverage of women and women's issues has likewise gradually improved, in part due to the combined pressure of the different national and international lobbies and advocacy campaigns. Nevertheless, the portrayal of women as content and characters remains largely negative, unhealthy and biased. The Supreme Court's directive to the Cabinet Secretariat in 1995 to draft a bill that would ensure women's equal property rights, in direct contravention to a Constitutional provision, was a landmark media event. Media, however, generally concentrated on the disadvantages of equal property rights and merely contributed to the confusion the issue stirred.

Similarly, in 1996, when more than 200 Nepali girls trafficked in the various Indian brothels were rescued and returned to Nepal, much of Nepali media criticised the rescue efforts. To some media outfits, the situation even warranted humiliating, insensitive language, referring to the girls as "garbage collected from India" or "AIDS-affected prostitutes."

Last year, a popular national vernacular daily *Kantipur* bannered the torture and persecution of Ms. Marani Devi Shah, a middle-aged, rural-based health worker accused as a witch. Ms. Shah, was beaten up and fed human waste in front of hundreds of locals. The newspaper condemned this cruelty and utterly criminal behaviour in its editorial page and ran

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follow-up stories regularly. As a result, the incident became widely publicised, the criminals were arrested and Ms. Shah, was supported by different sectors.

In advertisements, telefilms, dramas and literary write-ups, on the other hand, women are still presented disparagingly. For instance, the women on the most popular entertainment programme on NTV, "Hijo Aajaka Kura" (Day-to-Day Affairs), are most of the time pushy, cunning,

tricky, garrulous, insincere, silly and ignorant characters in domestic roles. An analysis of 24 entertainment programmes on NTV registered zero percentage of self-employed women roles, in contrast to the 41 percent of male roles in self-employed businesses. Most of these programmes deal with social issues, and when the producer thinks a women's place is in the home, it is no surprise that women achievers are absent (Thapa, 2002).

#### **Women's Portrayal in Media**

Despite a significantly altered socio-political scenario, much of Nepali media continue to present women in gender-stereotyped roles. They are confined to household work while the men are individuals with specific expertise and professional skills. There is obvious hesitation in introducing new role models for women.

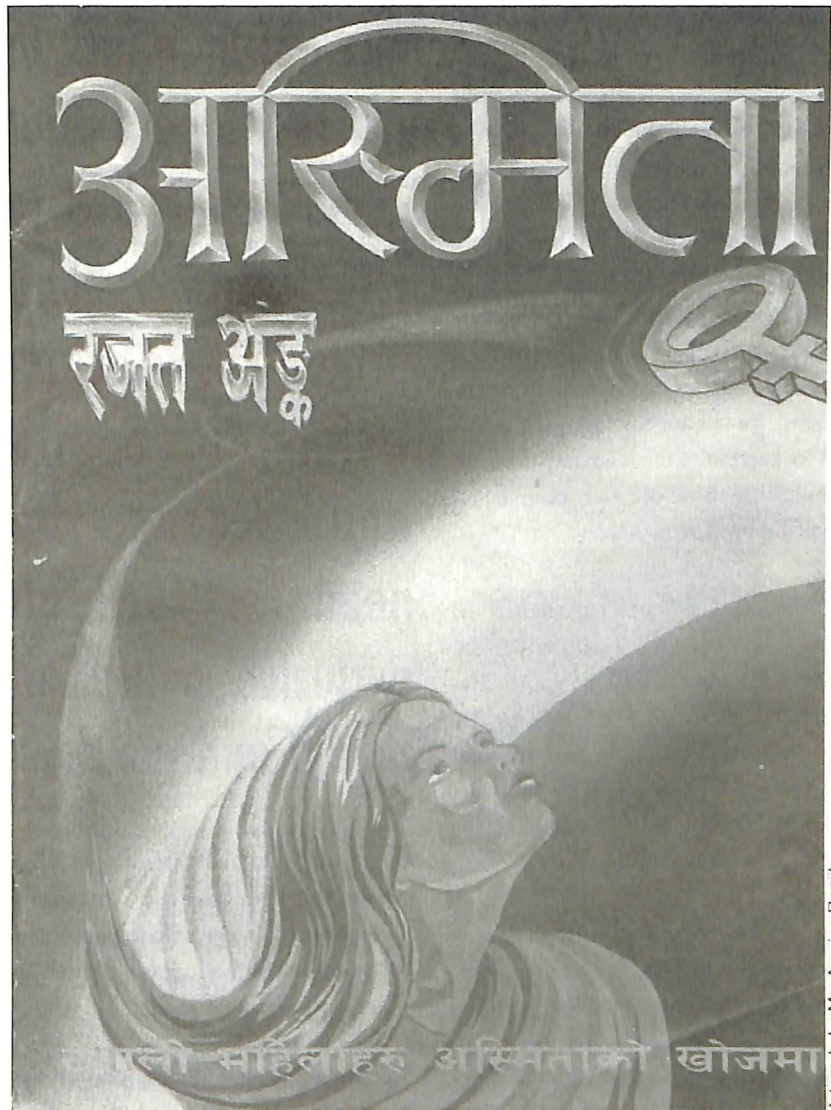
A survey of 65 NTV advertisements, meanwhile, found that only three of these featured women engaged in paid work, of whom two were plucking tea leaves and the last one was a female doctor. The women in the rest of the ads were washing clothes, cooking, cleaning the house, raising the children and so on, thereby reinforcing the notion that a woman's place is at home (Thapa, 2000).

Few women are given space as well in the news and informative features in Nepali print and electronic media. And even in the presentation

of some women celebrities, more importance is given to their personal affairs than their capabilities and achievements. Women are rarely associated with "serious" issues such as politics, conflict, unemployment or international geopolitics, and quotes from women experts are rare in news analysis and feature articles.

Another common feature of Nepali media's presentation of women is their objectification of women as entertainment fixtures or sex symbols. The women artists (movie artists) are attacked with vulgar language and crude comments about their personal traits or physical appearance in the gossip columns and entertainment magazines and programmes. Incidents of violence against women are frequently sensationalised when covered by media. In addition, the right to privacy of a victim is not fully honoured. Such treatment indeed leads to increased incidence of violence against women in society.

An extreme example of the negative impact of irresponsible media coverage of women occurred last October. *Jana Astha*, a weekly vernacular published a nude photograph of Shrishya Karki, an emerging Nepali film artist and accused her of being a prostitute. Ms. Karki committed suicide five days after the publication of that news and photograph. Her relatives and co-actors said that she committed suicide because of the pres-



Art work by Ms. Asmina Ranjit

"Nepali women and their quest for their identity," cover of ASMITA monthly magazine 25th issue, published on June 1994

ures of being featured in such a negative manner. They also said that Karki was being blackmailed by the editor of *Jana Astha*. The association of the cinema artists in Nepal raised their objections against such blackmailing and yellow journalism. They campaigned for the prosecution of the

news reporter and the editor of *Jana Astha*.

#### Women's Participation in Media

Women's limited participation in media is considered a major obstacle to a positive and inspiring portrayal of women. To date, not a single

nationwide study on women's participation in Nepali media has been conducted. But based on the three surveys of mainstream media organisations in the capital city, Kathmandu, completed by Asmita Women's Publishing House (ASMITA), only 12.32 percent of the workforces of state media organisations in 1993 were women. By 1997 when big private media houses were already in operations, this figure further declined to 9.16 percent of the media workforces, including those of newly established private broadsheets.

In 2002, women's participation in 14 different media organisations increased to around 20 percent. The marked change is attributed to the workforce composition in four commercial FM radio stations, where women comprised 43 percent of the staff (Chhetri, 2000).

If the substantial rise has not improved women's portrayal on media, this is because despite the increased rate of women's participation in media, there is almost absolute absence of women at the decision-making levels. Most of the women communicators on the FM stations are the producers of musical and entertainment programmes full of chat and gossip. Few of them are involved in news reporting, editing or the public service programmes.

Obviously, the employment of more women alone will not change

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the trends in media's characterisation of women. They have to be in responsible positions to be able to parlay media into a tool for women empowerment and gender equality.

#### **Women's Efforts in Using Alternative Media**

The negative depiction of women has prompted women's groups and individuals to explore alternative or parallel media to highlight their concerns and issues, though there are few alternative media organisations run by women themselves. Today Nepali women's groups are turning out magazines, audio and video productions and vari-

ous print materials to ventilate their issues.

*Asmita*, a monthly magazine oriented toward the women's cause, has been in circulation for the past 12 years. In the broadcast cluster, though there are only a handful of women's programmes on community radio, the quality and presentation of these are remarkable. These programmes air interviews on current women's issues, success stories of women, useful tips for women, and poems/stories with positive messages.

Similarly, two women's groups are operating audio towers in Ilam and Jhumka, two remote areas in Eastern Nepal. Mahila Samuha, Jhumka (Women's Group from Jhumka), and Mahila Samuha, Fikkal, Ilam (Women's Group from Fikkal, Ilam) have both been formed under the Women Development Program, a division of the government's women welfare agency. While both groups were formed to conduct credit programmes for women's economic empowerment, these two groups are also handling audio towers with the help of the District Women Development Program and UNICEF Nepal in the past four years. They broadcast items they themselves report/compose—news, plays, stories, jokes, tips, essays and poems, with low-cost technical equipment.

Likewise, Sancharika Samuha, a group of women communicators, has

been producing a women's feature service on a monthly basis. This service provides women and gender related articles to the mainstream newspapers and magazines. Such articles have been used widely by mainstream papers.

The huge problem of alternative media, however, is the question of sustainability. Because circulation and distribution are limited, impact is also limited, compared with the reach and influence of commercial mainstream media.

### Media Policy and Other Instruments in Relation to Women

The media policy of Nepal is absolutely silent on gender and women's concerns. None of the major policy mechanisms of Nepal as far as media is concerned—the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, National Media Policy, Press Council Act, Broadcasting Act and Code of Conduct for Journalists—mentions a single word about the coverage and participation of women in media. There are only general platitudes: "Journalists should not publish or broadcast the news that violates an individual's right to privacy and personal dignity" (Journalists' Code of Conduct, 1998); or "News that stimulate religious disharmony and provoke mutual conflict among religion, class, sex, cast and creed should not be encouraged" (National Media Policy, 1987).

Similarly, not a single private or state media organisation has developed any internal policy or guideline for the coverage of women and gender issues. The absolute lack of an instrument that could be invoked to challenge the prejudices against women in media underscores the need for such an exclusive policy on media and gender.

Another problem in harnessing media for women's welfare and empowerment is the lack of conceptual clarity at the decision-making levels of media organisations. In theory and conversation, most media managers prefer to provide greater space to women's issues and make their products gender-sensitive. But here again arises the problem, i.e., there is a great dearth of skill on how to integrate women's issues and perspectives.

Though Nepali media has yet to overcome its biases against women, whether as managers or characters of their programming, the changing attitudes of some authorities is an excellent opportunity for women's groups to persuade media to their cause. Women's groups have to pay more attention to their relationship with media as well as the Fourth Estate's treatment of their advocacy. They should ensure a continuous lobby for a gender-sensitive national media policy. They should also work toward clarifying to reporters, editors and other media practitioners, in

terms of disposition and skill, the intricacies of incorporating a gender perspective into their work.?

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