Culture Is Dead, Long Live Culture

by Sushma Joshi

Can a country promote cultural diversity through media as a deliberate national policy, or will all such policies eventually end up "Disney-fying" cultures by stripping them down to their most basic, visible symbols?

After the Nepalese King's Proclamation of February 1, 2005, which suspended democratic rights, including freedom of the press, in Nepal, television channels abruptly started to feature a number of poetry and literary readings from different cultures. First, it was the Tamangs, then the Gurungs, who both held readings in their own languages. The events were prominently featured in the evening news. The *deja vu* I felt came from the historical memory of such cultural events that took place during the Panchayat era of the eighties, when I was still in my teens. The Panchayat system, initiated by King Mahendra, had banned all political parties in favour of nominated leaders. Censorship of monarchy was punished, private enterprise was restricted, and media were limited to two or three state-run outlets.

What happened during the intervening 12 years of democracy to make media decide that cultural events of minority groups were not worth the airtime? And why suddenly, after the Royal takeover, were those programmes again being aired?

In 2004, I, along with a team of four people, spent six months traveling around Nepal, interviewing over 300 people in three districts regarding their access to justice during the conflict. We considered the media to be informal justice providers, since they are often the first or second point of contact that people go to for urgent intervention in human rights violation cases. But people from the media told us one overriding fact: They no longer reported civil cases because the conflict had become their single, most important priority. Since most publications in Nepal are not well staffed, a journalist assigned to cover breaking news on a bombing, a raid on an army barracks, or an extra-judicial killing simply will not have the time to report the domestic violence or the child

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abuse down the street. Similarly, reportage on events of importance to cultural groups got shelved for more pressing news.

Before the People's War started in 1996, media had also been heavily politicised in favor of one political party or another. An American friend of this author who was visiting Nepal was surprised to hear that locals could identify popular papers and their party affiliations. Tellingly, few papers are seen to be working within the tradition of investigative journalism that is balanced and fair. The strong politicisation of news before the conflict also meant journalists would be assigned to cover various politicians and their activities rather than any substantial news stories. Because of this trend, many of the old Panchayat-era priorities—like promoting cultural diversity events, since the State acted as benevolent patron of minority cultures—went unreported.

Part of the resistance of the democratic press to covering these events may also have come from media's perceived association with a Panchayat culture. Without a doubt, cultural and literary events were staged not just for the benefit of the community but also to show the community's linkage with the larger nation. Promotion of nationalism went hand in hand with promotion of diverse cultures. The State protected minority languages and cultures by allowing them to hold bounded and self-censored events—poets and writers were allowed to adulate the nation and culture with flowery language but rarely were they allowed to criticise them.

The boredom that Nepalis felt towards State television's addressing of cultural diversity issues before democracy was not just because the programmes were badly edited and presented. Programmes attempting to address cultural diversity would inevitably feature dancers of various groups in their respective clothing and ornaments, dancing away to the same music. The sense of static, non-changing traditions struck a false note, even during the days when we, as subjects, knew little else. When readings in different languages took place, no attempts were made to make an intelligent translation thus giving the audience the notion that the readings done in languages other than Nepali must inevitably not be worth being heard aloud.

In 1990, a nationwide democratic movement brought an end to the Panchayat era. Restrictions on the press were lifted, leading to a booming growth in FM radio stations, television channels, and newspapers. News media started to compete with one another in the private market, trying to grab a larger audience. News and programmes improved: opinions were freely expressed, there

were more democratic debates, and they were presented with more flair. Cultural diversity was everywhere—in the form of folks songs, in the accents of Singapore- and Hongkong-returned children of the Gurkhas now hosting FM radio stations, in the all Newari FM station. What was missing was the reification—the song and dance that had remained unchanged for centuries. Some observers concluded that "culture" was dying in Nepal because of globalisation so one no longer saw these shows. But, actually, what was dying was the old State definition of "culture," not culture itself. Cultures in all their vibrant, living manifestations found themselves given voice on radio and television.

With the clampdown of February 1, 2005, once again, the freedom of the press has been curtailed, and the Nepali state is trying to turn back the clock and return to an earlier era. All journalists must now quote official Army sources in their news articles when reporting on the conflict. News media are bringing out slimmer versions of their earlier selves because almost everything could be censored. The State will once again be a benign protector, and the song and dance in the traditional mold are once again back on the airwaves.

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Nepal has a large number of ethnic cultures who speak their own languages and who live inside its borders. Picturesque representations of them on national days, while giving different groups a sense of inclusion, do not address grievances, especially those of marginalisation. Groups crave visibility and respect on both state and private levels. The members of Newars, a relatively empowered ethnic group, have been successful in harnessing their own private resources and keeping their language alive in spite of Nepali dominance. Newars have done this through a number of private initiatives: an FM radio channel, making Neo-Newari culture fashionable among the Kathmandu Valley hipsters, as well as through written literature. Contemporary literary output in Newari is respectable, and keeps pace with other literary endeavours. Newari artists, too, have modernised their artistic traditions for a globalised market but continue to preserve their traditions whenever possible. The success of the Newars in preserving their cultural diversity hinged on a number of factors, including their urban based location, their control over financial resources, and their rich culture and heritage that could quickly be "translated" to a modern idiom.

The Newari model is difficult to replicate. Many ethnic groups in Nepal

do not even have a script, and use either Devnagari or Roman script to write their language. The easiest way to popularise local cultures has been to create radio programmes for different cultures, but even this has its limitations. The Tharus finally heard their language over radio around 1998, but this was just one of the Tharu languages amongst many. Trying to put all ethnic groups on their own FM channel is, for the moment, a distant dream.

In the meantime, the State can work with more substantive programmes for inclusion on television other than ethnic news features—it can encourage learning the native tongue languages in schools. The teaching of a few languages, like Maithili, has been introduced in Nepal at the primary school level.

The State still has to follow up with this commitment by providing enough books to make language lessons a reality. It can also ensure that smaller groups, like the Kuling Rai, do not get lost under the larger "Rai" umbrella but instead also get represented in state quotas. It can set aside reservations and state benefits for the poorest—usually *Dalits*—who do not yet feature as distinct cultures in policy. So, yes, there are ways to ensure that cultural diversity is addressed by the State. But just showing the different cultures reading poetry using their own languages on television is simply not doing enough.

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