

Relatively Free but Haunting Self-Censorship

In view of the detainment of two journalists by the district police in Kanchanpur, and the impending second round of local level elections which could witness political clash resulting in the intimidation on freedom of expression and media persons, Freedom Forum conducted a media mission in the far western region of the country. During the mission, the FF team held interactions with the media persons, writer, professor, senior security officials and the local administrations on the overall issues of freedom of expression. It visited the office of the journalists- Khem Bhandari and Ganesh Datt Bhatta- who were detained for a day by the local security over a news reporting and garnered information from both sides. The journalists, security officers and chief districts officers from Kailali and Kanchanpur districts were asked to put forth their views on whether there was favourable atmosphere for political parties/leaders/cadres for peaceful election campaigning, whether journalists were working without any fear and suppression and enjoying the atmosphere for free reporting, and whether the media was inclusive.

Separate meetings were held with the journalists, and security officials and local administration. In Kailali interaction, seven journalists from various media outlets participated in the interaction while Chief District Officer and Superintendent of Police had the interaction together. Even a noted book writer Ram Lal Joshi and a College Professor were consulted together. Similarly, the mission team held interaction with ten journalists in Kanchanpur district.

The media mission comprised Freedom Forum's Media Monitoring Officer Narayan Ghimire from Kathmandu, and DR Pant and Umid Bagchand from Dhangadhi. It was the three day mission conducted from June 20- June 22, 2017.

June 21, 2017

Umid Bagchand, Reporter to BBC and Chair, Far-West Human Rights Council

- Newspapers are publishing news, giving little space to some parties, while giving more to another, which is indeed a practice of self-censorship, and would result in invitation of threat and attack not only to particular reporter but to the entire media.
- There are aggressive Facebook updates in the recent time. Online media is spreading news in a sensational manner. However, there are very few people who read online news.
- Here, all journalists don't use online media.

**This report is prepared by Freedom Forum after conducting a media mission on the run up to the second round of local level election in the far-west region of Nepal.*

- Police take that the news are sensational. There is not hostile situation for journalists at present
- There are only 10 to 20 female journalists in the district especially. It is also due to the number of radios. If there were few radios, the number could be lesser.
- There is no planned media reporting, no investigative news here. Local election is focused now.
- It is difficult to run media at local level because there are very few advertisements.



Discussion with Kanchanpur journalists

Shivaraj Bhatta, Reporter to Annapurna Post daily

- Due to clashes among political parties during election campaigning, there is growing chance of threat to freedom of expression especially in hilly districts. There is less accommodative political culture in the hilly districts, while normal in southern plains.
- Media has failed to address the issues of remote districts in the northern parts as of Darchula. So, most of the news are focusing on southern plains (Terai/Madhesh).
- As local media are not well equipped, they are not able to do reporting from remote places.

Dipak Upadhyay, Reporter to News 24 Television, and to www.onlinekhabar.com

- One cannot move far away to collect news on his/her own expense, so national media must identify such problems and should prioritize it.
- Media show cooperate interests over national interests.

- Social media has blurred the role between citizen and journalists. However, update in the social media (by citizen) has become the fastest source of news.
- National media don't invest upon on us and has less concern towards us. So, many interesting issues have been left unreported. Also, we cannot go far away to collect news.

Dirgharaj Upadhyay, Publisher and Editor, Paschim Today daily, and General Secretary, Human Rights Common Forum

- Media still faces self-censorship because journalists cannot write freely.
- As party cadres themselves are journalists especially of CPN-UML, they don't write news explicitly against their party despite having flaws. But the journalists loyal to the Nepali Congress (NC) write news freely though it is against party.
- Journalists are not in a state of explicitly mentioning something as true or false because they are politically divided.

DR Panta, Reporter to Kantipur daily

- We're still facing difficulty to fairly write news about the Hulaki Highway (postal highway) because it is linked with many local political parties, contractors, security personnel, administrators. But same thing can be reported by the journalists from centre, Kathmandu as they don't stay here for long.
- There is the need to boost the social awareness, civic sense so that situation of FoE can be promoted and protected.

Dil Bahadur Chhatyal, Reporter to Nagarik daily

- The UML party cadres have also written the news about the UML- the activities within the party are published in the media.
- I have integrity in profession though I am loyal to UML party.
- Journalism is guided more by corporate interest than the interest of citizens so some sectors are still in shadow and need to be identified. There are very few news on agriculture.
- Media has not been able to focus on development and policy issues. Media is yet to expose political corruption. When a journalist wants to write on corruption, he/she suffers from self-censorship. As corruption has become institutional, media cannot disclose it so easily.
- Journalists are not active enough to publish investigative news.
- There is no hostile situation created by local administration for free reporting.

Chief District Officer of Kailali, Govinda Rijal

- Election campaigning is intensified on.
So far, there are no untoward activities obstructing election campaign and peaceful gathering. We've facilitated for creating better environment, so that the political parties would not clash.
- Our role is positive towards ensuring media freedom and freedom of expression are protected and the environment positive for it.
Media is yet to be inclusive. It needs change. Media here can disseminate rights news in a positive manner. Biased reporting of political activities creates confusion among readers. Anyway, Kailali media is satisfactory.
- Social media is somehow sensational, which result in negative impact. Therefore, social media should be disciplined.
- All sides' efforts are essential to realize the SDGs.

Superintendent of Police, Prakash Chand

- I fully agree with what the CDO Rijal said.
- In average, media role is good here. However, media can also play a positive role to create peaceful and harmonious atmosphere in society.

Dr. Badri Sharma, Associate Professor of Nepali subject at Doti Bahumukhi Campus, Doti district

- Comparatively election campaign is peaceful here.
- Environment is good for journalism but there is no professional integrity in journalists.
So journalists fail to bring right news. It then becomes a reason behind the threat to media person.
- There are very few news stories covering social and cultural aspects of society.
Journalists assume their work extraordinary, and want to exercise privileges, which is wrong in deed.

Ram Lal Joshi, noted literary writer, and former journalist

- Unlike the time of Maoist conflict, the atmosphere for exercising freedom of expression has improved a lot. Political parties are conducting their activities without any obstructions.
- Journalism can focus more on awareness rather than simply relaying information.
Journalism should be a factor to bring reform in governance and system.
- In order to keep the spirit of journalism alive, there is the need for investigative journalism.

- Right to information and media rights must be included in the school curriculum.
- Media is not inclusive but sometimes in the name of inclusion, provocative news is published which may disrupt the social cohesion and solidarity. News that promotes social harmony must be published, so that federalism becomes stronger.
- Online/Facebook must be reliable source of information. I was shocked to know the death of National Poet in the night, but it was fake news spread on Facebook and online media. How can the emotional damage fake news create be compensated? So, Facebook must not be misused, but utilized for goodness.

22nd June 2017

Laxman Tiwari, Editor of Aabhiyan daily, Kanchanpur district

- Due to the lack of qualified manpower, it is difficult to collect the voices/issues from different sectors.
- Compared to the traditional media, Facebook/online media are developing in a new way, yet they have much to progress.
- There are 200 journalists registered under Federation of Nepali Journalists in the district but hardly 40 are active. And there are only 4 to 5 women journalists. Although the national media (operated from the capital city, Kathmandu) are not focusing far west issues, they are sometimes visiting the far west.

Chitranga Thapa, Reporter to Kantipur daily from Kanchanpur district

- Kantipur daily has been working continuously to incorporate all sorts of news from the far western region. But, it is difficult to find qualified manpower in this region. So, there is very little practice of investigative journalism. Kantipur daily has invested on investigative reporting, yet many news needs to boost quality.
- I think Nepal has very good environment for the practice of freedom of expression.
- Political affiliation of journalists is dangerous to professionalism. Online/Facebook is more aggressive and has become a big challenge to traditional media.
- Why don't we need to have any agency to monitor the contents of online media?
- Isn't a time for media merger now? There are numerous media but lack quality. The role of Federation of Nepali Journalists is only limited to conducting election-electing its President, Vice-President and others.
- The atmosphere here is conducive for free press.

Bishnu Abasthi, FNJ Chair, District Chapter, Kanchanpur and Journalist with Shuklaphanta FM

- Constitutionally, Nepal has good provisions for practicing FoE but still some cadres of Biplab-led Maoist party are held in detention after they expressed their view that they would not participate in the election.
- Political parties' right to FoE is protected during election campaign.
- Journalists failed to make people aware on how they could select right candidate in the election. Media has failed to notify people regarding their rights.
- Due to the division among journalists for they are affiliated to some political parties and thought, professional integrity is in stake resulting in practice of self censorship.

Durga Upadhyay, reporter to Ujayalo News Network, and Vice Chair of FNJ District Chapter

- There is lack of social inclusion in media. Media has focused more on male candidates compared to female candidates.
- There are only 4 active female journalists in the district.

Amar Chand, Editor with Mahakali Today, and Secretary, FNJ District Chapter

As in political structure, female are less prioritized in media. It is the reflection of Nepali society in deed.

Chudamani Aryal, reporter to Shuklaphanta FM, Kanchanpur

- There is new trend in Nepal as if every sector needs to have the politics flavour which is very appalling. This results in biasness in the publication of news.
- Mere political presence of women and their presence in media is not inclusion. Other issues as of Dalits, and indigenious should also come to limelight.
- There is no investment and training to elevate the quality of the news. If one media does not value the identity of another media, how can they be merged for the quality of news?

Khem Bhandari, Editor and Publisher of the Manashkhanda daily, Kailali

(Bhandari and editor Ganesh Datt Bhatta with the daily were detained by police on June 18 and release after a day.)

- When we got information about police detaining two hotelier girls from the street for they were speaking foul being drunk along with a boy on 27 of Jestha, and creating commotion, I tried contacting Superintendent of Police and Deputy Superintendent of

Police in the district but they didn't respond. Firstly, I published news on website then on the newspaper.

- Next day, after the news was published, police sued the girls under Some Public Offence and Punishment Act. But police forced relatives of the girls to file a complaint against us arguing that the published news insulted his (applicant) daughter and sister. They claimed that after the news about the girls, the scheduled engagement of a girl was cancelled. With such complaint, police arrested me on June 18 at noon from my own office. I was not handed the arrest warrant. Similarly, Ganesh Bhatta was arrested at about 3:00 PM from local market.
- They arrested us on the ground of Some Public Offence and Punishment Act. I was baffled to see the charge posed by police officers.
- They tortured me by depriving me of regular medicine of blood pressure. Since then I'm yet to restore blood pressure to normalcy. They didn't allow me to have food my wife took to detention and didn't let me meet her either.
- Later, I was released as they failed to find any proof against me. The complaint itself was fabricated.
- Due to this incident, my self-esteem has been down. I have faced financial loss. But I have not been morally down.
- Despite this, other offices in the district are media-friendly and Manaskhanda itself has 17 staffs in total.

Deputy Superintendent of Police in Kanchanpur district, Bhim Dahal

- Election campaign is peaceful. Freedom of expression atmosphere is favourable in the district.
- We have friendly relations with media, and have RTI friendly laws.
- Khem Bhandari, publisher and editor of Manaskhanda daily, and its editor G Bhatta were held by the district police after a complaint was lodged here, seeking action against them under the Some Public Offence and Punishment Act. The complaint was filed by a relative of the two hotelier girls (of whom the newspaper had published the news regularly). In the complaint, the applicant had argued that even the marriage was cancelled due to regular publishing of news about the girls.

Finding and Conclusion

The key findings and conclusion of the mission are presented in a bulleted format below.

- Due to the affiliation to some political parties, most of the journalists were bound to have been practicing self-censorship irrespective of the extent. Writing much about one party, and very little about another would invite threat and attack on reporters and media house.

- Big scale of corruption was not exposed by the far west journalists because of the vicious nexus among the political parties, local administration, security agency, contractors and goons. This nexus was another factor compelling reporters to practice self-censorship.
- As the big media (national media) have not invested on reporters, the latter are reluctant to seek diverse issues for investigative reporting.
- FoE was not threatened much, situation for this was improved. Security agency and the administration was found friendly to FoE practice.
- In case of the detainment of editors Bhandari and Bhatta, both sides- editors and local authority (security agency) maintained the stand that both of them were right on their task. Editor Bhandari argued that he and Mr Bhatta were held without anything wrong on news, while the security agency said they were detained after a complaint was lodged against editors. However, detainment of journalists was the sheer misuse of authority by the police officials. The District Police Office could suggest the applicant that he could rather go to court than to police in case the news content defamed the hotelier girls.
- The journalists needed capacity enhancement training for investigative reporting. Investment on them was essential to seek diverse issues in addition to the dominating political matters.
- Once the vicious nexus among various sides continues to fear journalists, not only the corruption issues would remain undisclosed for long, but the self-censorship practice also would remain ingrained which is a threat to the freedom of expression.
- As long as the political parties and other stakeholders do not understand the role of free media, the democratic values would continue eroding. So, protection and promotion of FoE and journalists' safety must be the concern of all sides.

