

Case Studies from Nepal on Media and Corruption

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1. TV program on a medical college: Nepal Television (NTV), the only national channel under direct government control, blocked a regular program supplied by an independent production agency, Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists, because the program was critical of the Ministry of Education in granting a protected green forest to establish a medical college by an Indian agency. The prohibitive measure was taken at the behest of the Minister of Education alleged to have granted the permit for a new college and the forest site for pecuniary gains. However, the case was widely covered in the newspapers which are not under government control. Public agitation started against the use of the forest site, as a result of which the college was shifted to some other location.

2. Editor's penalty for contempt of court: The editor and his reporter of a leading official daily newspaper were prosecuted for contempt of court by a local Kathmandu court. The allegation was related to printing of a news which described how a judge (without naming him) embezzled the salary of his peon (attendant) without having one appointed. The story was based on the comment made by the Public Account Committee of the parliament on the findings of the Auditor General of Nepal, as accounted in his annual report. The report of the Auditor General is a public document, the Public Account Committee report is publicly accessible but the reportage of this information in a newspaper was found objectionable by the court which sentenced five days' imprisonment and five hundred rupees fine to the journalists. The journalists have gone on appeal to a superior court. However they are still on the parole.

3. Aircraft lease by national carrier: Kantipur, a Nepalese daily was successful in exposing a dubious deal of an aircraft lease by Nepal's national carrier, RNAC from an American agency, Chase Air with a consistent in-depth reportage. During the deal, the aircraft was never delivered and the RNAC lost about half a million dollar in the process. The crime of national loss was evident but no penalty has been meted out to the guilty. This case has been taken up after the public furore by the anti-corruption body, CIAA but nobody expects the guilty will really be punished. It is because none of the people involved in big corrupt practices has been punished so far.

4. Misuse of official media during elections: Nepal has TV, radio and newspapers under government control. The official media as they are called was legally obliged to remain neutral among the political parties during the general elections. But an independent monitoring of its performance found it heavily tilted in favour of the party in power. Other private newspapers carried reports of violations of code of conduct by government media to no effect. The Election Commission vested with the power to penalise the violators of the code of conduct did not act.

5. Partisan character of the press: The Nepalese press has two broad divisions, public-sector and private-sector. The public sector being under government control keeps away from stories on corruption. The private sector is replete with such stories. But it is further divided into several sectors on political party lines. Their stories are mostly politically biased bordering on character assassination. Therefore readers take them with a pinch of salt. They however provide a clue to the anti-corruption body to institute a preliminary probe. A record reveals that 60 per cent of such cases are not taken up beyond preliminary examinations for lack of evidence. Very few get finally framed out and submitted to the court for prosecution. Still fewer get legally penalised.

6. Pressures on newspapers: News boycott by the newspapers under pressures from the financiers

and advertisers is a common phenomenon. All stories relating corruption are invariably referred by the editors to the management before publications. It is the management which has the last say in the publication or suppression of such news items. -- A daily newspaper dropped a news relating to a telephone purchase deal by the Ministry of Information and Communication because the minister himself held some shares in the publication agency of the newspaper. -- A daily newspaper came forth with a news item relating to the privatisation of a public-sector company, Butwal Power Company visibly prejudicial to one bidder against another because the management was a party to the bidding process. -- During the South Asian games, there was an open allegation of corruption in government funds. The news appeared only in those weeklies which had not been supplied with advertisement.