Chapter 28

Understanding the Role of Media in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

The South Asian region is positioned at the heart of enormous socio-politico-cultural transformations that are repeatedly captured by the rising rates of consumption, population, unemployment, aspiration, urbanization, inequality and conflict within the region. In this region, media plays an increasingly important role in propagating mass wakefulness by shaping public opinion day in and day out. The cultural significance and value attached to South Asian Media whether it’s the print or audio visual media to the social and political life of people of the region presents itself for greater understanding of history of South Asian media including media culture, new technology and its impact on the regional politics and economics. This chapter intends to understand the dynamics behind the rise of social media, print media, audio visual media and film in these countries and how there is a cultural and social continuum that the media has to work with and employ in shaping public opinion within the South Asian region.

INTRODUCTION

News occupies the same dominant position modern society as religion once did, but we rarely consider its impact on us. Societies become modern, the philosopher Hegel suggested, when news replaces religion as our central source of guidance and our touchstone of authority. The news knows how to render its own mechanics almost invisible and therefore hard to question. Cocooned in classrooms for only our first eighteen years or so we effectively spend the rest of our lives under the tutelage of news entities which wield infinitely greater influence over us than any academic institution can. It is the single most important force setting the tone of public life and shaping our impressions of the community beyond our walls. It is the prime creator of political and social reality. (Alain De Botton, The News)

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The South Asian region is positioned at the heart of enormous socio-politico-cultural transformations captured by the rising rates of consumption, population, unemployment, aspiration, urbanization, inequality and conflict within the region. In this region, media plays an increasingly important role in propagating mass wakefulness by shaping public opinion day in and day out. Mainstream literature available on the cultural and political history of the fourth estate of all democracies in south Asia often ignores media’s role as an important catalyst accountable for these social and political metamorphosis. By and large, South Asia has been held hostage by persisting political conflict within the region. Despite national identities being strongly prevalent, there is social, geographical and cultural interconnectedness that cannot be overlooked. The cultural significance and value attached to South Asian Media whether it’s the print or audio visual media to the social and political life of people of the region presents itself for greater understanding of history of South Asian media including media culture, new technology and its impact on the regional politics and economics. Within the region so far, media by and large has been parochial and therefore panders to the demand and supply of the national audiences. To this date, several media institutions have been established with an aim of partaking greater regional cooperation amongst South Asian countries. This chapter intends to understand the dynamics behind the rise of social media, print media, audio visual media and film in these countries and how there is a cultural and social continuum that the media has to work with and employ in shaping public opinion within the South Asian region. The chapter intends to trace the political, cultural and political affinities demonstrated through the media amongst the countries of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Afghanistan owing its legacy to the British colonial rule. Cooperative measures undertaken by media such as Aman ki Asha, SAFMA have tried to bring people of the region together.

The attempt is being made to address these following questions: In what manner does media shape public opinion in South Asia? Does the medium of media influence foreign policies of states? How does jingoistic nationalism disrupt the attempts towards regional cooperation? In what sense can media play a role in promoting regional cooperation and contribute to peace and stability in South Asia? How do cultural and social differences between vernacular/local and English language media influence public opinion in the region? Mainstream literature on South Asian Media history and culture mostly captures and projects differences in the region in terms of religion, rituals, and border conflicts rather than manage positive cultural trends such as food, music and cinema. Several scholars have pointed out the anxieties of the neighbors caused by the dominance of Indian culture displayed through visual media.

BACKGROUND

Few scholars claim that it is risky to position entire South Asian history hostage to the exodus of western colonial establishments from the region and the subsequent nation building exercises in the region. Many commentators on the media history of the region point out those indigenous origins of print and visual media having started during the colonial rule within the region. Shakuntala Banaji in her book titled South Asian Media Cultures raises this issue and critically summarises the impact of media on the region. ‘While there is some merit in embedding a discussion of media cultures within a context of enduring national political conflicts, this approach is problematic if it represents India as somehow successfully negotiating between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ via its apparently vibrant democracy and neo-liberal economic conditions, while its neighbors are mired in religious fundamentalism, economic collapse, terrorism or separatist armed conflict. First, the history of the region comes to be read mainly