

NEPAL EXPOSED
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“In the midst of recurrent strikes, shutdowns, sit-ins and blockades, stopping traffic during rush hour has almost become a Nepali idiosyncrasy”. This opening sentence of the editorial of “THE KATHMANDU POST’ dated November 21, 2007 portrays the current situation of not only of the capital city Kathmandu but also of the whole country.

The Kathmandu Post which claims to be the largest selling English daily in Nepal with editions from Kathmandu, Biratnagar and Bharatpur, has been reporting about the socio-economic turmoil and political uncertainties in the country.

In this unpredictable situation the International Catholic Union of the Press (U.C.I.P.) held a Refresher Programme at Kathmandu. The Secretary General of UCIP who participated in the programme agrees with me that it was very daring of Mr. Chirendra Satyal, the local UCIP representative to organize the Refresher Programme in Nepal.

“I always leave something for God to take care of”, said Mr. Chirendra in evaluating the successful programme held at John Vianney Pastoral Centre at Godavari Valley from November 14 to 20, 2007. With board and lodging in the Pastoral Centre and the meeting in the Ishalaya Parish hall in the same compound we had an ideal venue for the UCIP programme.

The John Vianney complex also includes HIV/AIDS hospice, a convent of SABS Sisters and retired priests residence. The nearby 9,000 meters high Pulchowki Mountains surrounded the complex on three sides and far away on the west we could see the snow-covered Himalayan Mountains like Kanjanjanga and other Peaks. They offer an incomparable scenic beauty of nature. The venue about 4,000 meters feet high and the surroundings gave us a fair idea of Nepal’s unique geographical position and altitudinal variations.

We had five marathon sessions on the first day exposing Nepal from socio-political and religio-cultural as well as ethnical situations in the country.

The first speaker was Bishop Anthony Francis Sharma, the first Catholic Bishop of Nepal. Bishop Sharma gave us a historical perspective of the Catholic Church in Nepal. He divided the Nepalese Church history into four periods beginning from 1715 when the first Italian Capuchins came to stay and work in Nepal. Earlier a Portuguese Jesuit Fr. Juan Cabral passed through Kathmandu in 1628 on his way from Shigatse to Hugli in India. Then a Belgian and an Austrian Jesuits visited Kathmandu from the Chinese Observatory in Peking on their way to Agra, the headquarters of the Tibet–Hindustan Mission in India.

The Capuchins first settled in the Kingdom of Kathmandu from January 1715 and then extended their services to the Kingdom of Bhaktapur and Patan in the Kathmandu Valley.

Then, for a period of 140 years there was no presence of the Catholic Church in Nepal. The Jesuit presence in Nepal began with Fr. Marshal Moran, the then principal of St. Xavier’s High School, Patna coming to Nepal in 1949. He was sent by Patna University to supervise the annual

examinations at the Trichandra College affiliated to Patna University. Fr. Moran returned to Kathmandu to start St. Xavier's School at Godavari with two other Jesuits in 1950. Fr. Moran started the second Jesuit school, St. Xavier's High School at Jawalakhel, Kathmandu in 1954. Then came IBMV Sisters from Patna and opened St. Mary's School to educate Nepali girls.

The present period began in 1984 when Government of Nepal requested the Vatican for diplomatic relationship. The Vatican then established a new ecclesiastical unit of Nepal and appointed Fr. Anthony Sharma as the first Ecclesiastical Superior. Then, Archbishop Cacchiavillian presented his credentials to the King as the first Pro Nuncio of Nepal in 1985.

With Fr. Sharma at the head, the Catholic Church began to spread to other parts of Nepal and saw a steady growth. In 1997 The Catholic Church became a Prefecture Apostolic and Fr. Sharma became the first Prefect Apostolic. Then, in 2007 the Nepalese Catholic Church was raised to the status of a Vicariate and Msgr Sharma, as the first Vicar, was ordained a bishop on May 5, 2007.

Today there are 8000 Catholics in the Church and the total Christian population is estimated to be 1 million among a population of 25.5 million. The Church runs 1 college, 3 intermediate colleges, 12 high schools and 8 primary schools. About 65 priests and 137 religious sisters serve the Church in Nepal.

In April 2006 after prolonged protest, the reinstated parliament made a historical proclamation on May 18 declaring it "the supreme authority and the country a secular state". The declaration of Nepal as a secular state gave wings to the Catholic Church to grow.

In the second session a Jesuit scholar Fr. John Locke gave us a political and cultural history of Nepal from 1740. Nepal had many small kingdoms and ethnic groups which have had their own languages and culture. The 'present' caste system was incorporated in 1860 with Brahmin at the top and the dalits at the bottom. In 1961 Nepal became officially a Hindu state. But people in hills began to protest that they are not Hindus. The country was always controlled by Khas, Brahmin and Rajputs who formed only 25% of the population. Concentrating the development of Kathmandu valley and neglecting the rest of the country have led to Maoist insurrection. The monarchy, the symbol of unity, was destroyed by the royal massacre of 2003(?).

In the afternoon session the President of Caritas Asia based at Nepal, Mr Josh Niraula shared the information and services of Caritas Asia in general and Caritas South Asia in particular. Caritas international is spread in 200 countries and Caritas Confederation in Asia is divided into 7 regions. Caritas which began in Germany in 1897 is the oldest NGO in the world after Red Cross. Caritas is the largest non-governmental organization in the world. "The talking point of Caritas is the prayer of Archbishop Romero," Mr. Niraula said.

Mrs. Rupa Rai of Caritas Women Development Desk, who has been working with Caritas Nepal from 1992, gave an overview of the situation of women in Nepal who are 51% of the population. She said that the 90% of women live in rural areas and 70% of them in absolute poverty. Though they are only 39% literate, they earn 50% household income. Caritas Nepal is engaged in awareness and human development programmes in all the 75 districts of Nepal. "Don't sell my

dignity” is the motto fighting against human trafficking and exploitation of women and children in Nepal.

The fifth and last speaker of the day was a Protestant Pastor, Dr. K. B. Rokaya. Mr. Rokaya is also a Human Rights activist and was a spoke-person on behalf of Maoists with the Nepalese government.

Mr. Rokaya said that the spread of Christianity is unique in Nepal. After the 1990 Constitution, many people who have served in the British and Indian Army and have come into contact with Christianity embraced the religion, as prohibition of conversion was no more effective in Nepal. Mr. Rokaya opined that the dehumanizing and oppressive caste system of Nepalese society attracted many people to Christianity.

On the second day the Founder of South Asian publication called “Himal” and journalist, Mr. Kanak Dixit gave us a fair idea of the media situation in Nepal in the context of South Asia. Unlike some South Asian countries one language – Nepalese – dominates the media in Nepal. “As a journalist I wear two caps - a Nepalese cap and a South Asian cap,” Mr Dixit said.

“With 138 years’ history Nepal is the oldest country in the South Asia. We have never been colonized,” Mr. Dixit said.

Mr. Dixit advocated borderless nation states. “Respect nation states but also the community of the South Asian people,” he said. “Nepal has the largest mountainous tribal people in the world”, Mr. Dixit claimed. In terms of numbers no ethnic group dominated Nepal as the largest ethnic group forms only 17% of the Nepalese population.

Another speaker of the day was a Dalit leader Mr.Suvash Darnal who spoke in Nepalese and his assistant translated his speech for us. He gave us a very good idea of 40 lakh Dalit (tribal) population in Nepal; which he claimed the most neglected and discriminated lot in the country. “Even the educated Dalits are discriminated! Even though there is equality of people in Buddhist religion, dalits are discriminated in that religion too,” he said.

He regretted that the dalits are also neglected by the media. His dalit andolan movement has started a dalit Nepalese magazine to create awareness and highlight dalit issues. The dalit people have also set up Jagaran Media and Audio Visual Centre at Buddhanagar, Kathmandu and the first community FM Radio Station at Butwal, Nepal.

We were able to visit both the Centre and the community radio station as part of our exposure programme. Indeed, the Jagaran Media Center’s initiatives to create awareness of caste based discriminations and the severity of its consequences are commendable.

The last conference of the UCIP Programme was given by Dr. Pratyoush Onta, the Chairman of MARTIN CHAUTARI Research Centre. Mr. Onta, a journalist and author of many books, gave us a comprehensive idea of the Nepalese mass media today in a historical perspectives.

In the past Nepal had the king-led monarchy with partyless panchayat system up to 1990. But the first Janadolan brought in a new Constitution with political parties and election. Today the state does not have monopoly in the media. With the new constitution Nepal has seen a steady growth of newspapers and other periodicals. Today private radio stations are on the air covering 65 of 75 districts in the country. Still the state owned Nepal Radio continues to dominate. Television was started only in 1985 and its growth is slow as electricity reaches only 40% of the population. Then, there are no motorable roads connecting all 75 districts with Kathmandu!

Mr. Onta said that Kathmandu dominates everything in every way in the whole country! The media and news production are no exception. According to Mr. Onta, Janajati or tribals form 40% of Nepalese population and yet the media has not addressed the problem of social inclusion.

Nepal especially the Kathmandu Valley has many UNESCO Cultural world heritage sites and the delegates visited a few of them like Pashupatinath Temple, the 55 windows Durbar (palace) and Durbar square at Bhaktapur, Changunarayan Temple and Patan Durbar Square, etc.

By far the most exciting item of the UCIP Refresher Programme to this writer was our visit of Lumbini, 300 Kms away from Kathmandu by road. The memorable visit to the birthplace of Lord Buddha itself is the subject of another article. It is a pity that of the 40 plus delegated registered for the UCIP Refresher Programme only 20 delegates could attend it. I wish many more could have profited from it.