Media Representation: Coverage of the Nepali Army's Rescue and Relief Operations

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Abstract

This paper explores the media representation of the Nepali Army in its efforts of rescue and relief operations at home and abroad. In recent decades, the Nepali Army personnel have been directly involved in multiple public–welfare affairs along with their primary responsibilities of national security and territorial protection. Media representation of the Nepal Army has been examined from the perspective of Stuart Hall's classification of representation of meaning through language works. To unfold the media representation of the Nepal Army in its significant roles and core principles, I have taken a sample of the Nepali mass media content from the coverage of the *Sankatmochan* rescue and relief operations launched by the Nepal Army in two major national dailies, *Kantipur and Nagarik* in the aftermath of the 2015 *Gorkha earthquake,* for a period of a fortnight. The Nepali Army's effective manoeuvre of the earthquake relief embodies the institution's relevance in serving the cause of humanity along its core tasks of maintaining security, peace and order at home and abroad. In this paper, the coverage of different activities run by the Nepal Army is characterized as either reflective, intentional or constructionist. Moreover, the content concerning such rescue and relief operations has been contributing to shaping the image of the institution.

Keywords: media representation, operation *Sankatmochan*, rescue and relief operation

Introduction

Relief and rescue operations during the disasters, undertaken by the Nepal Army over the centuries, have immensely impacted Nepali society. Shahi Nepali Jangi Adda (1992) states that the history of rescue and relief operations of the Nepal Army dates back to 1938 when it deputes members to put off the arson in *Dharmasthali* of Kathmandu (p.507). Media coverage of such operations has amplified the Nepal Army's positive roles in public life along its core responsibilities of ensuring national security, protection of territorial integrigy, and safeguard of people's sovereignity. Nevertheless, the country's military institution has to respond to questions and reservations from differet parts of society for its direct involvements in infrastructure

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construction and public service delivery at home and abroad. Amidst such concerns, this paper explores the media coverage of the Nepali Army's vital roles in disaster management during the 2015 Nepal earthquake including disaster management and rehabilitation of the victims across the country. With its epicenter of 21 miles east–southeast of Lamjung and 48 miles northwest of Kathmandu and focus of 9.3 miles, the Gorkha earthquake left almost 9000 people dead and thousands more injured. Such a natural disaster struck Nepal for weeks when people could hardly travel around while they would not feel safe and secure at home. In such natural calamities, the Nepali Army directly involved itself in prompt rescue operations, saving lives and property, and supporting people to stay calm and resume their reigular life. However, the media coverage of the Nepali Army's involvments varies based on the communication channels' orientation towards the public life and their scope and structure in relation with the civil society.

The record in the Nepali Army (Chief of the Army Staff Nepalese Army, 2018) shows that the institution of the military institution was initiated just after 350 AD. In those days, the neighbouring countries, including China, Tibet and the southern states, known as India today, had armies of their own. As per the historical records such as the documents of the regimes of prominent Lichchavi kings, including Manadev, Shiva Dev, Narendra Dev and Anshuverama. King Narendra Dev's Nepal had extended the cooperation of 7000 cavalry and 3500 infantry troops in the year 647 AD at the request of China to attack a Southern Kingdom (p.15). Nepal also maintained military strength. Before the advent of the democratic era, its image was as a protector of the rulers. Before 1951, the Nepali Army was the only security force within the country (*Shahi Nepali Jangi Adda,* 1992, p. 4). King Prithvi Narayan Shah has used the term *Sipahi [Sipahi],* but in his understanding of Sipahi is also about the soldiers while he was saying that Sipahi needs to be sharpened frequently (Panta, B.S. 2073, p.101).

The unification campaign of Nepal was initiated in 1740 AD at the time the British East India Company had already started colonizing the Indian provinces (Chief of the Army Staff Nepalese Army, 2018, p.16). Likewise, the history of the Nepali Army goes back to 1744. It plays a historic role in the unification campaign led by King Prithvi Narayan Shah. According to the records of the Nepal Army, since unification was not possible without a strong army, the management of the armed force had to be exceptional. It states that apart from the standard army being organized in Gorkha, technicians and experts had to be brought in from aboard to manufacture war materials. After the Gorkhali troops finally captured Kathmandu, known as Nepal at the time, the Gorkhali armed forces came back to be known as the Nepali Army (Chief of the Army Staff Nepalese Army, 2018, p.16). During that period, its image was established as the force to maintain national integrity and sovereignty. However, in 1961, it was used to topple the elected government. Nevertheless, the indifferent role of the Nepal Army during the popular uprisings of the 1980s,1990 and 2005-6 practically demonstrated its mandate. Nepal introduces separate forces to maintain law and order in domestic affairs only after the advent of its first democracy in 1951. Since the establishment of Police Head Quarters in 1952, the Nepali Army, in general, has not been involved in civilian affairs and the public also perceives it as a force to protect sovereignty and territory. During the ten-year-long insurgency that lasted between 1996 and 2006, it was used within the country, after declaring an emergency. Though, in some cases of excessive use of force or extrajudicial killing, it took action against its cadres within the organization.

In addition to its traditional role in national security and conventional notions of the same, the Nepali Army has been able to create a popular image within the domestic and international sphere. In terms of scope, this paper is confined within the sphere of the media representation during the rescue and relief operation in disasters; the paper does not deal with its image and role vis-a-vis the conventional understanding of national security Hence, media coverage of the rescue and relief operation launched by Nepali Army in the aftermath of the Gorkha earthquake-7.8 richter scale is examined in a bid to explore its image in the public sphere. At this point, media coverage has been taken as public domain where image of any institution is used to be constructed. As Kharel (2012) argues, news media acquire special status for mediated dissemination of information in Nepali Society (p.53), analysis of media representation of any institution, person or campaign would convey the state of media performance. In this context, Kharel (2012) expects that the editorial room should function on the lines of the first three branches of government. It asserts that if the editor (executive), the rest of the editorial department (legislature) and the audiences (judiciary) work for quality content but ultimately reflect the larger society accurately and adequately, they contribute towards developing checks and balances for their more formal peer organs of the state: the executive, the legislative and the judiciary (p. 53). Thus, the extent of media coverage about any personal event or incident and campaign depends on the functioning of different branch between media and society.

Brooks and Hebert (2006) argue that in the consumption-oriented, mediated society, much of what comes to pass as important is based often on the stories produced and disseminated by media institutions. They hold that much of what audiences know and care about is based on the images, symbols, and narratives in radio, television, film, music, and other media (p.297). With the belief that media coverage is required to form a popular image, this paper, broadly discusses the content of two major Nepali dailies to examine the media representation of the activities undertaken by the Nepal Army under the rescue and relief operation, Sankatmochan. Thus, it explores the patterns of representation of the institution created over the years by its efforts regarding rescue and relief operations.

Methodology

This paper, against the backdrop, broadly discusses the content of the two major dailies, *Kantipur* and *Nagarik*, from the period of Operation *Sankatmochan*, launched by the Nepal Army immediately after the massive earthquake on April 25, 2015. The content from those newspapers over a 15-day period after April 26 and the coverage of May 26, 2015, as the sample of the coverage of rescue and relief operation under the banner of Nepali Army.

Image building is not just about communication and exposure. It is a representation through the mass media that contributes in shaping the image of an organization. The paper is not directly concerned with the question of images created by the media. Rather it is about the media's depiction of the organization. Thus, the paper focuses on the question of how the media depicts Nepali Army. Two national dailies are chosen, purposively, as a sample of Nepali newspapers. They generally represent Nepali media landscape. How they depicted the work of Nepali Army relating to rescue and relief over the period mentioned above has been studied.

For this research paper, media depictions, or media representations, are how the media portray the Nepali Army. For this purpose, the two national dailies were studied for a 15-day

period after the earthquake, as mentioned earlier. Hence, the objective of the study is to show how the Nepali media in general, and two popular newspapers in particular, portray Nepali Army. As Wimmer and Dominick (2005) state, the unit of analysis might also be a theme, a single assertion about one subject, three catagories of representation have been taken as units of analysis.

Conceptual Framework

Media representation and image building

Media representations reflect the worldview, message, norms and values and beliefs held by the creator of the text. This paper explores how the representation of the Nepali Army in the aftermath of the Gorkha earthquake of 2015 reflects the perceptions held by the Nepali newspapers. The content presented by these two dailies could be an indicative sample of the Nepali media in general.

Here, representation is the way that newspaper texts present the activities of the Nepali Army. The examination of representation is an attempt to assess and evaluate the messages of text, both manifest and hidden.

As Hall (1997) holds, language is the privileged medium on which people make sense of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged (p.1). He further argues that a key moment is created by shared meaning within a cultural context. He views that meaning can only be shared through the people's common access to language (p.1). Against the backdrop, this paper takes mass media as a vehicle of language that carries meanings about an institution and its activities. The belief is that the mass media outlets, enable the audience to arrive at a culture of shared understanding, thereby, interpreting the world around them. Since Hall (1997) asserts that language operates as a representational system (p.1), the mass media would have an instrumental role in standing for or representing the Nepal Army and its rescue and relief operation in the aftermath of the Gorkha earthquake. This paper henceforth analyses the state of representation of meanings in media coverage of rescue and relief operations through the media texts.

The media coverage of the rescue and relief operation of the Nepal Army can be divided into three categories based on Hall's classification of representation of meaning through language works. He divides representation into three categories such as reflective, intentional and constructionist. Hall (1997) states that there are broadly three approaches to explaining how the representation of meaning through language works. He calls them the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist or constructivist approaches (p.24). Media representation of anything falls under these three categories.

In Hall's analogy each of those categories can be understood as an attempt to answer the questions, 'where do meanings come from?' and 'how can we tell the "true" meaning of a word or image?' He further states that in the reflective approach, meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in the world (1997, p.24).

The second approach, as Hall (1997) states, to meaning in representation makes the opposite case. In Hall's view, representation means that it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language. For him, Words mean what the author intends they should mean. Thus it is the intentional approach. Again, he asserts, there is some point to this argument since we all, as individuals, do use language to convey or communicate things which are special or unique to us. to our way of seeing the world (P.25). In the context of mass media there is plenty of room for intentional representation. As CP Scott states, facts are sacred, comment is free (scott, 1997, p108). Media, especially the letter texts, try to interpret the phenomena.

The third approach, as Hall (1997) argues, recognizes the public, and social character of the language. It acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meanings in language. He holds that things don't mean: we construct meaning, using representational systems - concepts and signs. In the constructivist or constructionist approach to meaning in language, we must not confuse the material world. where things and people exist, and the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, according to him, it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning. to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others (p.25). Audiences create meaning out of the media texts depending on their surroundings and understanding. Hall gives an example of traffic lights to explain the representational or symbolic system concerning the constructionist approach to media representation. He further clarifies that in the language of traffic lights, it is the sequence and position of the colours. as well as the colours themselves, which enable them to carry meaning and thus function as signs (p.27). Hall (2001)'s idea of representation can be understood further with his observation of the moment of the production process during the consumption or reception of the media message (p.163). Hall suggests that media texts contain a variety of messages that are encoded (made/inserted) by producers and then decoded (understood) by audiences. Therefore what people see is simply a 'representation' of what producers want us to see. Hall (2001) believes that media structures must yield encoded messages in the form of meaningful discourse. He holds that institutional-societal relations of production must pass under the discursive rules of language for its product to be realized (p.168).

Hall (1997) argues that representation work has also come to be known as the semiotic approach - semiotics being the study or 'science of signs' and their general role as vehicles of meaning in culture (p.6). In Hall's semiotics, people make sense of a sign in the form of word or action which produce meanings, and individual readers and audiences circulate those expressions in cultural practices. Meanings of those words and actions in society are mediated with ideology of the ruling regime.

In line with the semiotic school of communication theory, Fiske (1990) states that semiotics as a discipline regards all the things human beings produce as being capable of establishing semiotic meaning and when we start examining these things, semiotics regards

them as texts. This could be an analysis of a haircut or a pair of trainers, if so the haircut or trainers would become the text (p.40). Thus the semiotic school tends to draw upon linguistics and the arts and tends to address itself to works of communication.

A radically different approach to the study of communication is semiotics. Here the emphasis is not so much on communication as a process, but on communication as the generation of meaning. Fiske (1990) argues that when I communicate with you, you understand, more or less accurately, what my message means. For communication to take place, I have to create a message out of signs. This message stimulates you to create a meaning for yourself that relates in some way to the meaning that I generated in my message in the first place (p.39). Hall (1997) holds that the underlying argument behind the semiotic approach is that, since all cultural objects convey meaning, and all cultural practices depend on meaning, they must make use of signs; and in so far as they do, they must work as language works, and be amenable to an analysis which makes use of Saussure's linguistic concepts, e. g. the signifier/signified and langue/ parole distinctions. His emphasis is on the underlying codes and structures, and the arbitrary nature of the sign (p.36). Thus we can conclude, the semiotic school of communication theory sees communication as the production and exchange of meanings.

Illustration: Hall's idea of circuit of culture where an audience find a key moment of representation of any phenomenon or activities
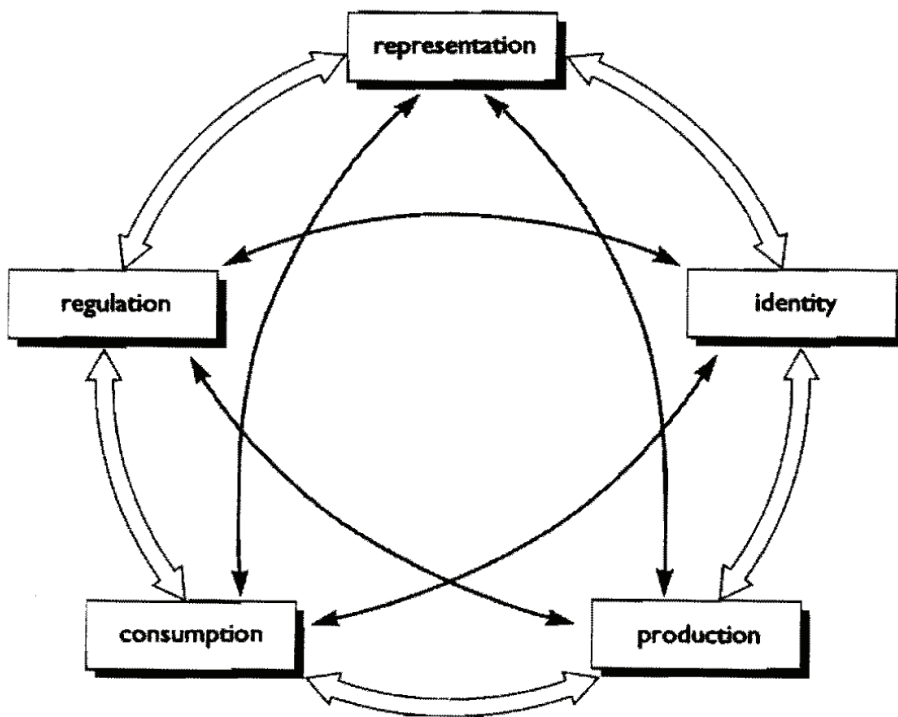
Source: Adaptation from Hall, S. (1997).

The media representation of *Sankatmochan,* Rescue and Relief operation by the Nepal Army

Media Coverage and the Process of Imagebuilding

Chief of the Army Staff, Nepali Army (2018) recalls that the rank and file of the institution were at the forefront in responding to the Nepal-Bihar Earthquake of 1934, the Udaypur Earthquake of 1988, the floods in the Terai in 1993, the Kosi floods in 2009, the cholera epidemic in Jajarkot in 2010, and more recently to the landslide in Jure in 2011 when it blocked a major river creating a lake that was threatening the dense settlements downstream to India (p.65).

The Nepali Army, with support from and in coordination with other stakeholders, conducted a rescue and relief operation named Sankatmochan [Liberation from crisis] in line with the National Disaster Response Framework in the aftermath of the mega earthquake of 25 Apr 2015 (Directorate, 2015, p.7). The operation was divided into three phases comprised of immediate activities, coordinated rescue and relief activities and finally reconstruction and recovery.

Directorate of Public Relations of the Nepali Army (2015) recalls that immediately after the mega earthquake hit Nepal, the Nepali Army made all endeavours to reach out to the affected areas in the shortest possible time and to save the lives of those at risk. Initially, as the Nepal Army recalls, the hasty operation order for Operation *Rahat* was issued an immediate mobilization of the Nepali Army personnel for search, rescue and relief at all levels was put into effect. According to the Nepali Army, when a more comprehensive assessment of the damage was made, a need for an operation of a larger scale was felt and Operation *Rahat* was superseded by the more deliberate Operation *Sankatmochan* (p.7).

Coverage of the rescue and relief operation in the form of news reporting by the Nepali media could be considered a reflective representation. There are other forms of a write-up such as soft news, articles and editorials that could be categorized as intentional representation. But there is another form of coverage such as photographs where an audience can construct the meaning as per the understanding of the world around them. Coverage in both *Kantipur* and *Nagarik* presents examples of constructionist representation of the activities under operation *Sankatmochan.*

Table 1: Media Representation: The Nepal Army and Operation Sankatmochan in the aftermath of the Gorkha earthquake 7.8 Richter Scale (Coverage of two weeks)

S.N.	System of Representation	The Kantipur Daily	The Nagarik Daily
1.	Reflective	15	7
2.	Intentional	8	6
3.	Constructionist	22	15

(Source: Content Analysis, 2023)

Table 1 shows that both the daily newspapers published news reporting or hard news, soft news or feature and a few articles and editorials in covering the activities concerning the rescue

an relief operation launch by Nepal army. Here, the plain hard news and clear photograph with catchy moment and caption are categories as reflective representation. Likewise, editorial, article or soft news are categories as intentional representation. Constructionist representation, for this study, is found in photograph depicting some activities without clarity and without caption and a few commentaries as well.

Coverage concerning the activities of Nepal Army in the aftermath of the earthquake both the newspapers from April 26 to May 11 including the newspapers published on 26 May has been analyzed with the help of set unit of analysis.

On April 27, the day third of the earthquake Kantipur reports on the six-column front page news that Nepali Army has speeded up the rescue and relief operation. Under the news a three column photograph, depicting the soldiers of Nepali Army removing rubbles, is also published.

On April 28, *Kantipur* reports, under the heading more activities in rescue operation, that Nepali Army has fully dedicated with entire force to rescue and relief operation and started Operation *Sankatmochan.* The news is based on press conference, but presentation, mixed with views, offer intentional representation.

On the same day, in April 28, 2015, the third day after the earthequake, *Nagarik* daily published a photograph under the news entitled number of slain has been growing. The photograph spread over four columns shows a helicopter and soldiers rescuing the injured people. The caption reads that Nepali Army's helicopter taking off the injured people to Dhulikhel hospital. The photo could be considered an example of a constructionist representation of activities under the rescue and relief operation launched by the Nepali Army. Any audience can construct the meaning out of this text.

On April 29, box news on page 2 of the *Nagarik* informs that on the fourth day of the earthquake, a woman was rescued by the Nepali Army rescue team in Kathmandu. Since it is field reporting, it could be referred to as the reflective representation of an event.

On May 1, 2015, after a week of a massive earthquake, *Kantipur* reported that as much as 90 per cent of total human resources within the Nepali Army was involved in the rescue operation. The news spread over four columns on page 3 was a soft matter which could be categorized as an intentional representation. The same day, under a photo feature a photo, depicted a rescue moment where a helicopter and soldiers were presented. The photograph could be referred to as a reflective representation. On another inside page, a photograph was used under an article concerning the rescue and relief tasks. The photo has depicted soldiers of the Nepali Army busy removing the rubble.

On May 2, 2015, under the heading spread over six columns in *Kantipur,* there was a photograph of a member of disaster management battalion number 1 under the Nepali Army who had rescued a child from the deadly rubble the other day. The headline reads people who save lives by facing life risk. Since it was not breaking news that soft news was there because of the selection of an editorial team. So it was an example of intentional media representation. Another example of the same sort of coverage on the same day was the photograph of the

earthquake affecting Army Headquarters and a standing soldier. Likewise, another photograph shows that the Army personnel are busy working on rescue operations at Army headquarters. Another photo depicts Army personnel waiting to dispatch relief materials at Pokhara Airport.

On May 25, after a month, news on page 3 of *Kantipur* informs that Nepali Army donated 24 Crore to the Prime Minister Relief Fund. A photograph inserted within the news shows that the Chief of the Army Staff along with other Generals handed over a cheque to PM Sushil Koirala for the relief fund. The news states that the money was collected among the entire rank and file of the Nepal Army. The news along with the photographs falls under the category of reflective representation.

The content analysis reveals that by the end of a month after the earthquake, the coverage of rescue and relief operation started to descending. On May 26, there is nothing regarding the rescue and relief operation in the *Nagarik*. There is a one-column news in *Kantipur* that informs that a team of Nepal Army with helicopter brought the more remnants of US Army helicopter which was crashed in Sindhupalchok during the rescue operation. Beside this news no other materials including the photograph is covered on that day.

Conclusion

Both types of texts, letter texts as well as photographs, in the form of media content, have presented the rescue and relief activities of the Nepal Army. Especially the photographs leave space for the audience to construct the meaning. Most of the content falls under the constructionist category followed by reflective and intentional. Overall, the media coverage represents the human activities, contributing to a humanistic image of the Nepali Army.

Media coverage of the rescue and relief operation, one of the significant contributions to the non-military sphere by the Nepali Army, based on the activities. As the whole nation was in crisis in the aftermath of the Gorkha earthquake operation *Sankatmochan*, rescue and relief operation was covered by the news media for their intrinsic newsworthiness. The coverage also manifests the media's respect for the rescuers as heroes. Editorial comments and matters of analysis are insignificant in number. The coverage is less about mirror reflection on the activities, than interpretations.

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