



## **THE 2002 RAMON MAGSAYSAY AWARD FOR JOURNALISM, LITERATURE, AND CREATIVE COMMUNICATION ARTS**

### **BIOGRAPHY OF BHARAT KOIRALA**

The odds against using the mass media for any meaningful purpose in Nepal are daunting. Two-thirds of the country is made up of mountains, so a mere third of the land is arable. The result is low productivity, with the gross national product (GNP) per capita amounting to only U.S.\$1,370. Yet, these mountains as well as plateaus are home to nine out of every ten Nepalis who have built their villages here. Man-made problems such as erosion and deforestation are common.

Information and education through the mass media can help promote development among these people, but there is yet another obstacle: only six out of every ten Nepali men, and less than three out of every ten Nepali women, are literate. Even if the more common forms of mass media such as newspapers could penetrate this difficult terrain, the contents would be meaningless to most of the people.

But, Bharat Dutta Koirala, a Nepali journalist, has found innovative ways to hurdle most of these obstacles and to provide rural Nepalis with the information and education that they need. The fifth in a family of seven (four sisters and three brothers), Koirala was born in Kathmandu on February 3, 1942, to a couple who had no formal schooling. Both parents taught themselves to read and write in Nepali. His father, Ram Dutta Koirala, even wrote poetry and published a book of poems. His mother, Heramba Kumari, could read books and write letters to him and his siblings. Ram Koirala was the son of a landlord from the Gurkha district in western Nepal who moved to Kathmandu. Heramba Kumari was born in Kathmandu and grew up in a predominantly Newar area, inhabited by the royal city's majority population.

While residing in Gurkha, Koirala's paternal grandfather looked after not only his own estate, which was large, but also the estates of certain absentee landlords who preferred to reside in Kathmandu. From time to time, he visited them in the capital to discuss business matters and deliver proceeds from the estates. During one such visit to Kathmandu, he decided to stay there permanently. Gurkha was a two- to three-day hike from Kathmandu. Ram, who suffered from gout and had difficulty walking, visited the area only twice. In time, the family lost much of its contact with Gurkha. The Koirala family, however, still owns some land where once the ancestral home stood.

To earn a living for himself and his family, Ram Koirala managed the estate of an aristocratic family named Thapa. Shere Jung Thapa, the family patriarch, was a close friend of Ram's and invited him and his family to live with his own family. In the Thapa mansion, the household was managed by a large staff employed by the Thapas. Bharat's parents and his older siblings lived separately in special quarters where they cooked their own meals, while he and his two younger siblings shared the Thapa family quarters. Thus, in the Thapa house, Bharat's playmates were children his own age, including relatives of the Thapa family. He went cycling with them, played football (his favorite sport), and some cricket. Few people owned a football in those days, but Bharat not only owned one, he also had a playground on which he and his friends could play anytime.

Bharat Koirala recalls that the Thapa household was "seething with servants." Two or three of them did nothing but look after the family cows; another two or three did only the

cooking for the Thapas and their servants; and one was in charge solely of the family shrine, a fairly large room where people used to go early in the morning to worship or meditate. The Koiralas, for their part, employed a cook and a couple of people to do the household chores.

People regarded the Koiralas as wealthy, even though it was the Thapas who owned practically everything they enjoyed; at a time when few people in Nepal had cars, they had two. This was in the 1940s, when cars had to be literally carried on human backs into the Kathmandu Valley.

But, the Koiralas' good life did not last. Managing the Thapa estate was difficult for Ram Koirala because most of it was in the south, an area infested with malaria and prone to flooding. Despite these difficulties, he was able to expand what had begun as a modest estate into a vast one. As he purchased each new parcel of land, the property was placed in Mr. Thapa's name.

Shere Jung Thapa had no son to inherit this estate. He had a daughter who, because she was married, could not automatically inherit the family property. In 1956, when Bharat Koirala was in the eighth grade, Patriarch Thapa suddenly died of cancer. When that happened, says Koirala, Mr. Thapa's wife and daughter "stole everything from us because it was all in their name." This came as a shock because, in fact, Koirala's father had served the Thapas faithfully and expected a portion of the property to go to his sons and daughters.

The lifestyle of the Koirala family now changed abruptly. From what Koirala describes as the "big palace" that was once their home, they moved to a smaller house that his father had built for guests visiting from outside Kathmandu. They still had servants, but not as many as before. Koirala says this change was a blessing in disguise; it taught him to struggle. "We were leading an easy life," he said. "One of my brothers died from alcohol (abuse) because that's where he learned to drink."

Koirala's father turned to mining semiprecious stones and talc. But his companies never prospered, despite years of effort in far-flung mining camps. This was a source of family frustration. When Koirala had just finished high school, for example, his mother told him to go and help his father in his mining operation in Dhading district. He is "squandering everything we have," she told him.

Koirala had no choice but to go. He stayed with his father and helped him oversee the mines. He saw that his father was simply too kind, too giving, to be doing business. For example, a porter would be paid so many rupees a day. But if a porter happened to be an old man who carried less of a load than younger ones did, Koirala's father would say, "This is an old man. Look at him. Give him double (wages)." After six months, father and son closed down the business.

Koirala studied at Saint Xavier's, a school opened by the Roman Catholic Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1951. Before then, such schools were not allowed in Nepal under the isolationist policy of the ruling Rana family, which had dominated the kingdom for 104 years. The Rana family had been toppled that year. The Jesuits, who had long maintained schools in India, acted quickly to open their academy in the capital city.

Koirala remembers his father telling him one day that a new school, a boarding school, was about to open and that Koirala should go there because it was going to be the best school in Kathmandu—in part because the Jesuits were renowned for imposing discipline. Before Saint Xavier's opened, Koirala says, the local schools were so bad that he was beginning to dislike going to school. Although only in the third grade, he had already developed the habit of skipping classes to visit a local printing shop where the printing process fascinated him. He was among the first students to be registered at Saint Xavier's. In fact, he was the fourth among the first sixty students to enroll.

At Saint Xavier's, Koirala and his schoolmates wore the school uniform—a white shirt

and blue pants in the winter, a white shirt and blue shorts in the summer. The main school building was the former summer palace of the Rana prime minister. Since it could not hold all the needed classrooms, its cowsheds had to be turned into classrooms, too, and its stables into libraries. “The smell was still there when we moved in,” Koirala recalls.

Although Saint Xavier’s is less than twenty kilometers from Kathmandu, the road connecting it to the city in those days was so bad that a car ride took almost three hours. Public transportation was nonexistent. Koirala became a boarder, and the school principal, Father Moran, hauled him and other students to and from school in a jeep with a trailer at the beginning and end of festivals and school holidays. Today, the school is only twenty minutes from Koirala’s home in Kathmandu.

Student life at Saint Xavier’s was austere, but Koirala liked it because he found many opportunities for self-development. He liked sports, for example, and every Wednesday and Saturday he and his schoolmates went mountain climbing, clambering up the hills just behind the school. It was an activity that Koirala enjoyed thoroughly. Koirala also enjoyed theater, music, and rhetoric. He joined a school play every year, was first tenor in the glee club, and won several elocution and spelling contests.

In all, Koirala spent eight years at Saint Xavier’s, from third grade through his Senior Cambridge. Except for one Nepali, all his teachers were American Jesuits. Instruction in the school was entirely in English; students were forbidden to speak Nepali. Koirala credits the teachers at Saint Xavier’s for his very good English—he was an A+ student in English language as well as English literature; this, he says, is how he got into English-language journalism.

One of his best-remembered English teachers was Father Eugene Watrin, who was also an excellent soccer coach. Another Jesuit who left a lasting impression was Father Niesen, the school principal. Koirala liked him because, despite being a strict disciplinarian, he had a “very loving nature.”

According to Koirala, it was Saint Xavier’s that imbued in him some important and lasting qualities. When the announcement came that he had won the Ramon Magsaysay Award, some Jesuit fathers came to congratulate him. When they asked where he got his discipline and values, he answered, “You gave them to me.”

From his own father, Koirala learned to be tolerant and to think progressively. He believes his father learned the first of these virtues while living in rural areas. In rural Nepal, peasants or villagers are often looked down upon. But Koirala’s father did no such thing; he treated them with respect.

From both parents, Koirala learned to reject any kind of caste prejudice. “That helped our family a lot. We became more enlightened, more progressive because of that.” Though Koirala’s father was a Brahman and, therefore, a member of the highest caste in Hindu society, he observed only a few of its rituals and traditions. His family was not in any way conservative, but its members did observe a few social customs that had religious significance. Violation of these customs would have resulted in ostracism.

But Koirala’s father was not a regular shrine-goer. He believed in charity. Koirala recalls, “If he had three coats, before my mother would know it, two would have gone. If he saw somebody without clothes, his clothes would be gone.” Koirala says his mother used to say this trait came from his paternal grandfather; when he traveled from Gurkha to Kathmandu, he carried money with him. His generosity was so well known, says Koirala, that people sat by the wayside, “waiting for this man from Gurkha. By the time he reached home, everything was gone.”

When Koirala’s father died, the family followed the custom of mourning for a year. The first thirteen days after death are the most austere and difficult. Family members can eat only certain foods, wear only white clothes, and are required to sleep on the floor. And

the Brahman priests had to be fed and clothed, since it was believed that whatever was given to them would go to the spirit of the deceased in heaven.

Koirala said his father left a will—not a common practice in Nepal—in which he had written, “Don’t give anything to the Brahmans for my spirit. If you want to give anything, give to the poor. And let my sons not observe this ritual for a year. Let them not wear white.” The sons obeyed but decided to give a little to the Brahmans after their sisters argued that the spirit of their father would suffer if they did otherwise.

After Saint Xavier’s, Koirala enrolled at the Amrit Science College in Kathmandu to improve his chances of getting a scholarship to study engineering in India. He finished Science College in two years and was waiting for a promised scholarship when his life took an unanticipated turn.

A general election had brought the Nepali Congress Party into power, and the man chosen to lead the party and become Nepal’s first elected prime minister was Bisheshwar Prasad Koirala (B. P. Koirala). He also happened to be a neighbor and close friend of Ram Koirala, Bharat’s father. He had promised that a worthy student like Bharat would one day receive a scholarship to study abroad. But before this could happen, King Mahendra abruptly dissolved the parliament, jailed B. P. Koirala, and decided to rule the country according to a personalized system of governance he called “Panchayat.”

One day before the political change, Koirala’s father took him to meet “B.P.” for the first time after he had completed Saint Xavier’s with distinction. B.P. was so impressed with Koirala’s intelligence that he said to the boy’s father, “He has to go abroad to study.” In those days, a college education in the United States or England was so costly that Nepalis could achieve it only if they were awarded a scholarship from the government.

B.P. told Koirala: “Study here for two more years and I’ll see that you get a good education abroad.” After a year and a half in power, B.P. was ousted as prime minister. This meant Koirala had to compete for a scholarship to study at a university in India. He was poised for the competition. It was at this moment, however, that his mother asked him to join his father in the mining operations. By the time father and son returned to Kathmandu six months later, the scholarship competition was over, dashing Koirala’s immediate hope of attending engineering school in India.

At first, Koirala did not know what to do. His family could not possibly afford to send him to school abroad on its own. He had two choices: wait another year for the next competition, or go into something else. He could see that his mother was troubled because of his father’s quixotic business ventures. Already, one of his brothers, who was employed but earned little, was carrying the financial burden of the whole family. Koirala realized that he had to go to work.

Koirala became an English-speaking tourist guide for guests at Kathmandu’s big hotels. He and others went to the hotels in the morning to find out if guides were needed, and how many. They were never sure if they would have any work at all. But if they did, the money was “pretty good,” says Koirala. He enjoyed the work. And it was relatively easy. In those days, little information was available about Kathmandu. No authoritative tourist books had yet been published. Koirala recalls with amusement: “Whatever we said was true. ‘How many years old?’ tourists would ask. One day we’d answer, ‘Two thousand years old.’ Next day we’d say, ‘Three thousand.’”

Koirala took advantage of this flexible, well-paying day job to attend school in the evenings. He enrolled at National College, the night-school affiliate of Tribhuvan University, to study economics and political science. Two friends, both classmates from Saint Xavier’s, joined him there. Given the sort of educational training that he and his friends had had at Saint Xavier’s, Koirala says, the three of them “changed that college around a bit.”

First, they put together the first English play in the college. Staged before a large audience, it made the principal very happy because it brought positive publicity to the school. As Koirala put it, “For the first time, this college that no one cared for had a play.” Then, Koirala and his friends joined a national quiz contest and won second prize for the college—another first. The prize came in the form of a complete set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, something the college could not afford to buy.

Koirala never got involved in activism at the university. Politics, he felt, was for extroverts, “people who want to be in the pulpit and make speeches.” He was shy, a trait he traces to his stay at Saint Xavier’s: “We were so far away from society out there. Cloistered in that old Rana palace.” It is interesting, he notes, that Saint Xavier’s graduates rarely enter politics. “They’re in other professions—the best engineers, the best doctors, the best teachers.” Even now, he says, the Jesuits sometimes ask why a Saint Xavier graduate has never become a government minister, a senior civil servant, or a leader in the political opposition.

By 1962, Koirala realized he needed a more stable job. Upon learning that there was a vacancy for an administrative assistant for the military attaché at the American embassy in Kathmandu, he went to apply. The warrant officer at the military attaché’s office was impressed with his English and asked whether Koirala could translate from Nepali into English, type, and drive. When he answered yes to all three questions, he was told, “Okay, come from tomorrow.”

Koirala enjoyed his new full-time job. From his own account, it consisted mainly of meeting the needs of the colonel’s wife, such as calling the plumber when the bathroom was leaking, translating, and just driving “if there was any running around to do.” The job taught him the kind of multitasking that he had to do later in life.

Shortly afterward, however, Koirala moved to another job. His best friend—and one of his compatriots at Saint Xavier’s and the night school—was working with the British Information Service. He told Koirala about a vacancy in his office and urged him to apply. The position paid slightly more than Koirala’s job at the American embassy, and he went for an interview. The British Council officer who interviewed him was so impressed that he told Koirala to report for work the following week. Koirala was excited because he thought he and his friend would have a great time working together. But two weeks later, his friend left the office to marry King Birendra’s sister. He was to be among those killed during the massacre of King Birendra and his family at the royal palace in June 2001.

Koirala’s new job consisted of analyzing the local press, translating stories from Nepali into English when British interests were involved, and preparing a daily briefing on media coverage for the British ambassador. The availability of so many outstanding journals inspired him to read about international affairs. It created in him an increasing interest in journalism and creative writing.

It was during his stint with the British Information Service, in 1965, that Koirala received his first offer to work with a newspaper. At the time, Nepal was locked in a series of disputes with its larger neighbor India over border issues, trade, commerce, security, and a host of other problems. The English-language Indian newspapers, which sold more copies in Nepal than Nepali newspapers did, carried scathing articles about the country. But the Nepali government could answer these attacks only in Nepali through the *Gorkhapatra*, its Nepali-language newspaper. The government had no English-language newspaper. It now hoped to start one to counter attacks in the Indian press.

Like the *Gorkhapatra*, this new newspaper would become part of Gorkhapatra Corporation, the government’s publishing company. What the minister of information had in mind was an English-language broadsheet to be named the *Rising Nepal*. An editorial

staff had to be organized to run the paper but this was not easy because, at that time, not many Nepalis could write in English.

Among the places the minister's people visited to look for potential staff was Saint Xavier's. The Jesuits told them to approach Koirala because he was good in English. The director of information himself came to offer Koirala the job of chief reporter, commensurate with the post of associate editor. As Koirala remembers, it offered "better salary, better facilities, and a good position." He would report directly to the paper's editor. Koirala was happy to accept the job.

Shifting to the new government-sponsored newspaper drew Koirala into the repressive realm of journalism in his country. A number of privately owned newspapers already existed in Nepal, but the country's Press and Publication Act severely limited their freedom of expression. For a period of thirty years under the so-called Black Laws, newspapers could not question the legitimacy of the political system or the wisdom of its nonaligned foreign policy. Newspaper editors were routinely jailed under the Act, their printing plants closed, their newspapers banned. In the small world of Kathmandu, all the private-press editors were Koirala's friends. He felt angered whenever any one of them was arrested because, as far as he could see, they had not committed any wrong. Their primary "crime" was to ask, in public, whether the current political system was good, or at least good enough.

Because of the stringent press controls, genuine reporting opportunities at the *Rising Nepal* were limited. Moreover, government offices had no spokespersons; there was not much of a private sector to report about; and few newsworthy events were taking place. Just the same, chief reporter Koirala and his two assistant reporters were expected to find news. He recalls: "The reporters would never last more than two days. They wouldn't find a story, (so) it would seem like they were not . . . doing their job. So they would say, 'No, I would like a desk job.'" Koirala ended up doing all the reporting and writing himself. Although there were occasional press conferences, these did not make his job any easier because he was often the only reporter available to cover all of them.

The *Rising Nepal's* circulation was extremely low because there was hardly any English-reading public. The newspaper catered mainly to embassies, United Nations agencies, universities, and subscribers in the government. Readers paid more attention to the paper's advertisements and public notices than they did to the news and features. Koirala says, "It was a poorly edited paper because we had . . . a big staff of highly incompetent people." If an issue of the paper did not pass through him or through one of the other competent editors, it would be so bad that he would feel ashamed to show it to anyone. He learned that, at Saint Xavier's, a copy of the paper was sometimes posted on the school bulletin board with a sign saying, "How not to write English."

Most of the good writing at the time, Koirala says, appeared in the Nepali-language *Gorkhapatra*. Its editorial staff wrote very well, in part because they were writing in their own language. "The editorials used to be readable and the features used to be good," he adds. Koirala learned the techniques of English-language news writing by reading Indian newspapers. "Indian newspapers used to be read a lot, so those were our standards," he says. "We didn't have any training in journalism. Now that we know what good journalism is, we also know that Indian newspapers were not fit to be our models."

Koirala got a respite from the *Rising Nepal* when the people running Gorkhapatra Corporation asked him to look after the *Nepalese Perspective*, the corporation's weekly 32-to-36-page magazine that was published to promote Nepal. It was distributed through the Nepali embassies. Koirala says, "The English proved to be so bad that the embassies stopped distributing them." He spent a year or two editing this magazine. Although he had several writers, their articles were so poorly written that he had to rewrite them all. His

mother used to ask, “What kind of job do you have? Can’t you have a regular job? Do you have to work twenty-four hours a day? Can’t you come back for meals?”

In 1971, Koirala attended a postgraduate diploma course in journalism at the Indian Institute of Mass Communication in New Delhi. Prior to this, he had had no formal training in journalism. Even so, he says that his experience as a working journalist meant the course was “fairly easy for me.” The class had twenty-one students from seventeen countries. The group was simply too diverse for the management—the Africans and Indians did not get along, for example. Koirala became the peacemaker. He was from a small country and, by his own account, the most “noncontroversial.” The institute appointed him manager of their hostel. And, even though the responsibility was supposed to rotate among the class members, Koirala remained the manager throughout the yearlong course.

For Koirala, this sojourn in India was historic for two reasons. He received an award from the *Hindustan Times* for being the Best All-Around Student in the course. And he met Mahsheed Iqani, his first wife. Iqani was an Iranian who had previously studied at the University of the Philippines Institute of Mass Communication. When political turmoil broke out on the Philippine university campus in the early seventies, she was advised to leave the country along with other foreign students. She returned to Iran but soon left to enroll at the Indian Institute of Mass Communication. There she met Koirala and married him.

Iqani was a Bahá’í and Koirala learned about this faith from her. The more he learned about it, the more he was drawn to it, because its principles were very much what he himself believed in: unity, peace, harmony, and no prejudices. After more than a year of study and exposure to Bahá’í teachings through Iqani and the Nepalese Bahá’í community, Koirala became a Bahá’í himself.

Koirala and Iqani had two children—a son, Samir, and a daughter, Shabnam—both of whom are now adults. When Iqani died suddenly from a massive asthma attack in 1986, Koirala spent five years raising the two children as a single parent. In 1991, he remarried, this time to Jo-Anne Pach, an American teacher at Lincoln School and, earlier, at the British primary school in Kathmandu.

After his studies in India, Koirala was engaged for a year and a half editing a four-volume, Nepali-language, five-thousand-page gazetteer of Nepal, with a profile of each of the country’s seventy-five districts. A project of the king, it was the largest publication in Nepalese history. A team of three editors had been engaged to edit the book but two of them abandoned the project in midstream. Koirala worked daily at the Royal Palace to finish it. The work was exhausting and, by the time the book was published, his eyes were bloodshot.

At about this time, Koirala was appointed chief editor of the large Nepali daily *Gorkhapatra*, a job he tried to refuse. He did not know Nepali well enough, he said; his education and work experience were in English. But his superiors answered, “You have just edited the biggest volume in Nepali. How can you say you don’t know Nepali?” He had little choice but to accept.

Koirala was only thirty-three at the time. By then, the *Gorkhapatra* was about seventy years old. It had prestige and a good circulation, reaching all four thousand village clusters or *panchayats* in Nepal. Moreover, the paper’s writers and editors were scholars of Sanskrit and Nepali literature, “the best humor writers, the best essayists and art critics in the country,” he says. “And here I was, a young fellow, the youngest on the staff as chief editor.” But precisely because of *Gorkhapatra*’s popularity and wide circulation, it was politically tricky. “One little mistake and you could get into trouble,” Koirala says. Which

is what happened to his predecessor: he was sacked for getting the name of the queen wrong.

As executive editor of the *Rising Nepal* and then of *Gorkhapatra*, Koirala had to practice self-censorship. “If the editor of a private newspaper couldn’t question a policy of the government for fear of being punished, you can imagine what our situation was,” he says. As mouthpieces of the government, *Gorkhapatra* and the *Rising Nepal* had to follow and support its policies. When Koirala wrote editorials, he knew the bounds. When his reporters found something controversial in a story they were doing, they brought it up with him first. And if the story involved political parties and the opposition, everyone would sit down together and decide what to do.

At the *Rising Nepal*, Koirala’s superiors had given him some leeway because they wanted the paper to develop credibility with international readers. They said: “You have more authority to criticize specific policies or specific projects of the government than the *Gorkhapatra*. The *Gorkhapatra* should support the government in every aspect because the paper is for Nepalis.”

Even so, Koirala did criticize a little. For his trouble, he received calls from ministers in the middle of the night, asking, “What is this?” He would reply that the criticism was sound and that it would be better if the minister made the needed change. To this, a minister once said, “I’m going to the palace right now to ask the king to sack you.”

“This sort of thing went on,” Koirala says; “I didn’t care. The worst that could happen was I’d lose my job. Finding another job wasn’t a big problem.”

After five years as chief editor of the *Gorkhapatra*, Koirala was asked to become executive chairman and general manager of Gorkhapatra Corporation. He knew that the organization was “badly managed, overstaffed, poorly paid.” It was losing money and constantly having to beg the government for more. He replied that he could not take the position because he was a journalist and an editor; he did not want to become a manager. “But His Majesty’s government is asking you to do this,” said the beseeching minister. When Koirala again said no, the minister called him back, saying, “If His Majesty’s government asks you to be the general manager, even for a temporary period, just to tide over the present crisis, I hope you won’t refuse it.” He could not.

The “temporary period” lasted five years. As executive chairman and general manager of Gorkhapatra Corporation, Koirala modernized the company’s printing technology, shifting it from hand composition to computerized typesetting and from sheet-fed letterpress printing to web offset printing. He expanded training for journalists and turned the corporation from a money-losing venture to a profit-making one, ending its financial dependence on government.

It had been the practice at Gorkhapatra Corporation newspapers to print everything the government sent, for free: public notices, press releases, even false news. Koirala began to question this practice, saying the government should pay for publicity and advertising like any other client. He had an auditor do the calculations and discovered that if the government did so, the corporation could turn a profit.

Armed with this information, Koirala went to the secretary of communication and told him the government would have to pay for advertising. In the same breath, he offered a 20 percent discount, 5 percent higher than he was giving his best private advertisers. The secretary replied, “Make it 25 percent.” Koirala readily agreed and, practically overnight, the corporation began to make a profit, raising its annual income some 300 percent.

Upon taking the helm of Gorkhapatra Corporation, Koirala had told its staff that if the company made a profit, everyone would share in it through increased salaries and additional benefits. He now went to the government to get approval for a change in the corporation’s

salary scale. He was told that the corporation was a government entity and that if Gorkhapatra was allowed to raise salaries, other government corporations would ask to be allowed to do the same. The answer was no. This deep disappointment coincided with another one. Koirala hoped to expand the daily newspaper *Gorkhapatra* with regional editions. But neither the banks nor the government was willing to fund the expansion.

For these reasons, when another opportunity beckoned, Koirala was ready to take up the offer. It came from Arne Fjortoft, a Norwegian journalist who had founded an organization called the Worldview International Foundation (WIF) in Sri Lanka in 1979. The foundation was funded by private donations. Fjortoft was a frequent visitor to Kathmandu and knew Koirala well. He was fascinated by Koirala's innovations at Gorkhapatra Corporation. At the end of every visit, Koirala would take Fjortoft to lunch and Fjortoft would tell him, "You've done enough for this corporation, why don't you join Worldview?" And Koirala would answer, "No, Arne, I still have work to do."

After five years with the Gorkhapatra Corporation, however, and facing rising frustrations, Koirala agreed to become WIF's regional director for Asia. He stayed with Worldview for two and a half years, promoting the use of new video technologies for economic development. Among his accomplishments was the introduction of television to Nepal. Worldview provided some secondhand black-and-white television equipment from Sri Lanka, built a small training studio, and trained the original staff of Nepal Television.

Another Worldview project used video technology and other media to promote oral rehydration therapy (ORT) through documentation of deaths from diarrhea. An evaluation showed that, as a result of this project, 86 percent of the population understood the value of ORT. In yet another project, Worldview staff members taught rural women to operate video cameras and encouraged them to interview each other about critical social issues such as women's rights. The tapes were used to establish dialogues between rural women and urban-based lawyers and social advocates. So successful was this project that it became the basis for a Finnish television documentary series.

During Koirala's tenure at Worldview, another important project was gestating. In 1976, Tribhuvan University had launched a journalism course in response to popular demand. But in the absence of qualified teachers, good course material and books, and even basic accommodations and other facilities, the course was not regarded as a good training ground for future journalists. The course itself was too academic. This led Koirala and his Gorkhapatra colleague, Gokul Pokhrel, to embark on a plan to create an independent, nonprofit training institute for journalists, newspaper managers, publishers, and other media professionals in Nepal. At the time, the country's only trained journalists were those who had attended courses abroad, such as Koirala himself and Pokhrel, who had studied at the Thomson Foundation in Wales. In 1984, they invited a group of respected senior journalists to join them in establishing the Nepal Press Institute (NPI). Among the founders was the late Gopal Das Shrestha, the doyen of Nepali journalism who ran and edited an English-language tabloid called the *Commoner*. Shrestha was asked to serve as chairman of the institute, heading a nine-member board made up of four representatives from government and four from the private sector. Koirala and Pokhrel both served on the board.

When Koirala left Worldview in 1986, his colleagues at the NPI asked him to serve as its executive director. In this position, and as secretary-general after 1997, Bharat Koirala and the fledgling Nepal Press Institute transformed press practices and the communications culture of Nepal.

Koirala remembers the NPI as it was when he assumed the directorship: "We had an apartment of two rooms and a staff of two-and-a-half people. The half was the part-time

accountant. So I had an assistant and a part-time accountant.” When the institute started, Koirala asked his assistant how much money they had in the bank. The answer: three hundred rupees. So Koirala asked, “How do you get your salary?” The answer, “Somehow, at the end of the month, I get my salary.” As for himself, he says, “I had to earn my own salary.” Moreover, in the beginning, instead of being paid a fee or an honorarium for attending meetings, board members actually contributed one hundred rupees each at every meeting. Koirala says this gesture was both necessary and symbolic. The practice has since been stopped, but all the money collected at these meetings was saved in a special account. Eventually, as the institute flourished under Koirala’s leadership, it moved into an entire house. Its annual budget had risen to fifteen million rupees by the time he resigned as the director.

The NPI’s first offering was a ten-month certificate course in journalism. Embellished and strengthened over the years, the course became and remains the essential foundation for all the institute’s work—its flagship program. Each year, about thirty students are accepted for the course, which consists of eight months of classroom work and two months of internship. “And the record is so good that when they do internship in a newspaper or with radio or TV, they are asked to stay on. So they get jobs, too,” Koirala says.

The course covers all aspects of journalism. It starts with theories of mass communication, and then moves on to development reporting and more specialized skills such as parliamentary reporting, investigative reporting, and modern information technology. It also inculcates professional values embodied in a Code of Conduct. “That’s something that is never discussed after they become journalists, so it’s good to discuss it beforehand,” Koirala explains. Students typically include some aspiring journalists, some practicing journalists, and public relations practitioners.

Some organizations in Nepal send students to the course on a regular basis. The government, for instance, takes five slots every year. The State Bank also sends one or two participants every year; they often end up manning the Banker’s Club, which publishes journals and annual reports. The police, too, send one or two participants almost every year, so that these days its entire information division is made up of NPI graduates. “When I visit the senior police officers,” says Koirala, laughing, “all of a sudden I get a salute from one of our students.”

Students who take the course pay a fee, so the institute is fully self-supporting. Participants sponsored by the government and other institutions pay more. The language of instruction in the certificate course is Nepali. Koirala explains that this is so because most of the institute’s students or trainees practice journalism in the vernacular language. NPI graduates represent a new breed of media practitioners in Nepal, says Koirala, with a real understanding of what makes good journalism. He believes that, as they become editors and media managers, they will change the face of journalism in the country. In fact, he says, it is happening: “We already have excellent newspapers, excellent magazines, excellent editors.”

Apart from creating a large pool of trained journalists who now staff Nepal’s print and electronic media, Koirala’s NPI also pioneered many innovative communication programs and stirred a lasting interest among young Nepalese journalists to serve rural communities. These innovations include development journalism, rural reporting, regional training, rural newspapers, wall newspapers, audio towers, and community radio.

Development journalism is journalism that focuses on ordinary people and how their workaday lives affect, and are affected by, social and economic development. Development journalism has been promoted from the late 1960s onward by the Press Foundation of Asia (PFA), the Manila-based association of newspaper publishers in Asia and the Pacific. With

funds from PFA, the NPI enabled young journalists to go into rural areas and report the stories of rural people in national newspapers. The impact can be seen in Nepal's mass media today, which carries far more "development" stories than it did fifteen years ago.

To further promote development journalism, the NPI entered into arrangements for the translation into Nepali of development-oriented stories from feature services such as the PFA's DEPTHNews, Inter Press Service (IPS), Gemini, and Panos. These translations were then distributed to a large number of Nepalese newspapers. "The premium on news about politics decreased tremendously after we started doing this," Koirala says.

A hallmark of the NPI under Koirala was collaboration with regional groups such as the Manila-based PFA and the Singapore-based Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC). It also cooperated with other international media organizations such as the International Institute for Journalism based in Berlin, the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development in Kuala Lumpur, and the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association in Tokyo.

In the mid-nineties, the NPI expanded its endeavors into the country's rural districts. The new project was spurred by an experiment of Koirala's—to make state-of-the-art technology available to local journalists to promote community newspapers. The first was *Gaunle Deuralee* (A Village Newspaper) published by a friend of Koirala's at Palpa in western Nepal. Koirala convinced the Asia Foundation to put up the money to buy modern equipment for the paper. The outcome was very interesting, Koirala recalls: "You go to this little town, go up a little lane, you open a door, and what do you see? A modern computer and photocopier, a little offset press . . . and out comes a beautiful newspaper."

*Gaunle Deuralee* is now distributed in over thirty districts of the country and regarded as a model rural publication in format, content, and language. It is in the Nepali language, which any literate Nepali can read. Any educated member of the community—a housewife, teacher or student—can report for the newspaper as a "barefoot journalist." It has gained the confidence of legions of rural readers.

The second community newspaper that Koirala experimented with was *Gaon Ghar* (Village Home). According to Koirala himself, this is a well-edited rural newspaper with local news and local content. It is published in Dang, another region in the country, as a family enterprise.

Koirala was forced to stop his experiment at just these two newspapers because of the high cost of modern equipment. Even popular community newspapers with healthy circulations cannot afford computers and offset presses without financial assistance. Even so, *Gaunle Deuralee* and *Gaon Ghar* serve as hopeful models for future community newspapers as resources become available. One possible source is the Media Development Fund run by the Press Council of Nepal. It provides loans to community editors and publishers who want to modernize their printing facilities. The Fund is run by a board, of which Koirala has been a member from the beginning. Some printing presses supported by this fund print not only their own newspapers but also other rural dailies and weeklies. All this led to the proliferation of small but well-edited and attractively printed newspapers in many small towns in Nepal.

Subsequently, Koirala tried a different approach to advancing district-based journalism: regional media resource centers under the supervision of the Nepal Press Institute. For assistance, he approached the Danish government. Two such centers were set up—one in Biratnagar, an industrial town in eastern Nepal, in 1995, and another in Nepalgunj, a fairly large city in the west, in 1996. At these centers, the institute provides training and support services in computer use, desktop publishing, photography, graphic design, advertising, and marketing to local practitioners. In the beginning, the institute covered the fees of

participants attending training sessions in these centers. Later, it provided only some with a subsidy, charging the rest full cost. Today, except for members of minority groups who are offered scholarships, everyone pays to attend the training programs.

The presence and the work of the Nepal Press Institute in the districts—through community newspapers and media resource centers—have significantly altered the media balance in Nepal. Previously, 60 percent of all newspapers were based in Kathmandu; now, only 40 percent are. The 60 percent based in the districts are staffed entirely by local reporters trained in journalism by the NPI through its outreach programs. And, whereas not a single offset press could be found in the districts until 1995, today, 60 percent of all offset-produced Nepalese newspapers are based in the districts.

Yet another idea that Koirala tried for reaching rural populations was the wall newspaper, something he first witnessed in India. In India, wall newspapers were used to trumpet government achievements. But the wall newspaper that Koirala introduced in Nepal was used to provide rural literates with reading material on social and economic development. It came as a single sheet containing inspiring success stories and other useful information on subjects of local interest such as agriculture, health and hygiene, education, family planning, child care, and reforestation. The stories and information were written in the simplest possible form of Nepali. The text was printed in large, bold type; attractive pictures and graphics and a comic strip illustrated the text. After being printed in Kathmandu, copies were sent to the villages to be put up on walls of public buildings, school buildings, and tea shops, to enable groups of people to read them at the same time. To make these newspapers stick to the wall, villagers used glue. Where glue was not available, they used cow dung.

Koirala explains the rationale for the wall newspaper: “We don’t have a reading culture. And the literacy rate is very low. So somebody could read from the wall and others would listen. Which was what actually happened in many instances.”

NPI developed its first wall newspaper in 1987. Also named *Gaon Ghar* (Village Home), it was a joint project of the institute, the Agriculture Development Bank, and the United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef). The institute provided the services of Hem Bahadur Bista as editor; the bank took care of administration and distributed the newspaper through its Small Farmers Development Program; and Unicef provided money for paper and printing.

On Koirala’s suggestion, the bank agreed to make the Small Farmers groups pay one rupee for every copy of the wall newspaper. He explained that if the newspaper was free, readers would not value them. Each copy of the wall newspaper cost three rupees to produce, so the small farmers were getting it at a subsidized price. The NPI made up for the difference by charging nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that also bought the wall newspapers ten rupees per copy. Several thousand copies were printed, Koirala says, “so we had quite a large sum of money collected from the income from the wall newspapers.”

*Gaon Ghar* was so successful that it led to the publication of many other wall newspapers. This dramatically increased the flow of development information within village communities. Even in neighboring India and Pakistan, many wall newspapers were developed on the Nepalese model. *Gaon Ghar* is no longer in circulation but a second wall newspaper, *Batabaram*, is still being published. Started by the Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ), it focuses on the environment. There are now hundreds of locally published wall newspapers in many parts of the country.

Another innovation introduced by Koirala’s NPI was the audio tower. This is a simple communication system that requires only an amplifier, a microphone, and several loudspeakers placed on the top of trees, hills, temples, or tall buildings. From a small room

or shed, women or young people using the system can bring news, music, announcements, and entertainment to villagers. It is considered the first step in setting up a community radio station. Once a community feels it can run an audio tower well, it can consider setting up and operating a small community radio station. The NPI provides training for the operators of these towers.

In recent years, the Nepal Press Institute has concentrated on promoting radio because the print medium faces severe limitations as a vehicle for change. The society is only slowly emerging from an oral culture in which reading is a rare phenomenon, so the level of literacy is low. Poverty is so widespread that most people cannot afford to buy a newspaper. Newspapers are difficult to distribute because the country is mountainous and infrastructure is still primitive.

Indeed, Koirala says that mass-circulation newspapers, by and large, are incomprehensible to most Nepalis, not only in terms of language used but also in terms of the issues and concerns covered. They tend to be too political, sensationalist, partisan, and elitist. Television, he says, also has limitations. TV sets are expensive and only 15 percent of the population has electricity, a situation that is not likely to change significantly in a long time.

Radio, however, enjoys tremendous advantages. It transcends literacy. Its signals can be received by most people with appropriate radio receivers. It can reach out to people living in remote or far-flung areas. It can broadcast in any language, including local vernaculars. And it can talk about subjects that these people care to hear about. It is also the simplest and most affordable technology available for public information and communication.

In 1990, a major change took place in Nepal's political system: the king agreed to become a constitutional monarch. Political parties had agitated for this change to bring an end to the concentration of power in the hands of the king and a few of his men, as well as to corruption and the abuse of power. This change radically altered the media landscape of Nepal.

A new constitution was written. Members of the press, particularly representatives of the Federation of Nepali Journalists, an active community with three thousand journalist-members, met with members of the drafting committee and told them that the new constitution must be specific about press freedom. The committee listened and, as a result, the new constitution, promulgated in November 1991, guarantees full freedom of expression and the right of people to demand information on issues of public importance.

The document has three articles on this freedom, providing what Koirala describes as "a breath of fresh air for the journalists." Article 12 states that everyone, not just the media, has the right to express an opinion. Article 13 states that the press should be free, that no journalist should be jailed for what he or she writes, that no newspaper should ever be banned, and that no printing press should ever be closed for what it has printed. Article 16 states that people have the right to demand and receive information on all issues of public importance.

From 1990 till October 2001, the country's record on press freedom was extremely good, even excellent, Koirala says. Within this period, the government did not imprison any journalist, did not close down any newspaper, and did not shut down any printing press. Not only did this make people in media happy, it also resulted in more investment in media, more training, and more media decentralization.

After the promulgation of the new constitution, the government set up a task force to draft a new communication policy that would be appropriate to a liberalized press. Koirala discloses that when the government made the announcement to this effect, "we smuggled

two of our people into the task force.” Their instructions were to make sure private broadcasting would be part of the new policy.

The new policy, effective in 1992, read: “Within the limits of the Broadcasting Act, registered private sector organizations will be permitted to set up FM (frequency modulation) broadcasting systems in defined areas and broadcast educational and recreational programs.” Soon after, in 1993, the National Broadcasting Act was passed and, in 1995, the National Broadcasting Regulations were approved.

The National Broadcasting Act sets specific guidelines for obtaining authority to broadcast. It also lays down the operational principles for ensuring that broadcasting follows norms set by the government. The Act also requires that a specific fee be paid together with the application for a license. It enumerates the kinds of programs desired in the new FM stations and urges all broadcast media to serve development programs, including agriculture, education, industry, commerce, science and technology, health, family planning, and forest and environmental protection. It also emphasizes the functions, duties, and rights of broadcasters, urging them to remain neutral when editing and broadcasting the news. It also sets up rules for political broadcasts in conveying to the public the manifestos, programs, or philosophies of political parties.

After the policy allowing private individuals or groups to establish radio stations was approved, Koirala and some colleagues in four media organizations—NPI, NEFEJ, Himal Association, and Worldview Nepal—decided to form a consortium to apply for a radio license. The application was made in the name of the NEFEJ; the station would be called Radio Sagarmatha, Sagarmatha being the Nepali name for Mount Everest (literally “forehead of the ocean”). The station’s declared goal: “To stimulate awareness and participation in public issues.”

The new consortium was repeatedly stymied in its application for a license. Meeting after meeting with government ministers and party leaders led nowhere, even after complying with all the terms of the National Broadcasting Act. The excuse given was that the rules for issuing licenses were still being worked out. Koirala believes that the government was simply afraid to give licenses to anyone in the private sector.

In the meantime, the consortium pushed ahead with its plans. Three friends of Koirala—Mortin Giersing, the communications officer at the Unicef regional office in Kathmandu; Torben Krogh, chairman of the International Program for the Development of Communication (IPDC) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco); and Carlos Arnaldo of the Unesco office in Paris—each offered to support the station, especially with its training efforts and infrastructure.

With the money from IPDC, for example, the consortium ordered a five-hundred-watt transmitter, an antenna, and studio equipment from England. These were then “smuggled” into Nepal through United Nations channels, says Koirala. “We didn’t tell the government. UN agencies don’t have to declare at customs.”

When a technician arrived to install the new equipment, Koirala told him, “Don’t let anybody speak on the microphone. When you test it, just play beautiful music, so everybody will say, ‘Where is this music coming from?’ That’s all. The curiosity will be there.”

But the director of Radio Nepal had learned that the consortium would test its transmitter on that particular day in 1996. He brought a radio to the office of the secretary of communication, placed it on the secretary’s desk, and said, “There’s something illegal happening today. I want you to know.” Koirala relates, “So he played it, played this beautiful music. The next day, the Ministry of Communication sent us a letter saying, ‘Your transmitter, which has been operating illegally, will be seized.’” During the next few days, the consortium

and the government played cat and mouse. The transmitter was moved from house to house; it “disappeared.” “We have so many wonderful friends,” Koirala says, chuckling.

Subsequently, two friends of Koirala’s were named to key government appointments, one as chairman of Nepal Television, the other as adviser to the minister of communication. Both of them applied pressure on the minister, so that in 1997, five years after the consortium had applied for a license, the secretary of communication finally issued it. This single act ended almost fifty years of government monopoly over the airwaves and made Radio Sagarmatha the first private and independent public-service radio station in Nepal. It also made Nepal the first country in South Asia to allow the establishment of privately owned and operated radio stations.

The government, however, did not give up easily. Koirala says, “When we took the license, the Ministry gave us a letter in which they had written thirty-one things that we could not do: You cannot broadcast news. You cannot do this, you cannot do that. In other words, it meant that we could just keep our equipment in a room.” Undeterred, Koirala and his colleagues began removing these obstacles. The measures they took included going before the Supreme Court and pointing out that, despite the granting of full freedom of expression under the constitution, government was preventing them from broadcasting the news. In 2001, the Court ruled that private radio stations in Nepal were indeed permitted to broadcast news.

After the National Broadcasting Act was passed, it took the government two years to announce its National Broadcasting Regulations. Koirala believes the delay was deliberate. It aimed to deny Radio Sagarmatha a license, while the organization of FM Kathmandu (the commercial FM station of government-owned Radio Nepal) was being completed. The issue was advertising revenue. Radio Nepal wanted a monopoly of FM advertising and feared that Radio Sagarmatha would eat into their profits.

Today, Koirala says, Radio Sagarmatha “has news—everything now.” “Everything” means innovative programming that combines news and sports bulletins, news magazines, current affairs, and interviews and panel discussions on vital issues including health, agriculture, environment, and human rights. It offers phone-in programs, political debates, and soft, melodious music—a mix of old and new, modern, classical, and folk music. Western classical music is played for an hour, starting at 10:00 p.m. The station also has advertising, mostly announcements from companies, government offices, or schools. Being a public-service station, it does not accept ads from soft drink, liquor, and cigarette companies.

Radio Sagarmatha also broadcasts or rebroadcasts programs, in Nepali, of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). In the past, these programs could be heard only on shortwave, whose clear reception was dependent on the weather. Today, Radio Sagarmatha receives BBC programs by satellite and broadcasts these on FM, assuring listeners of a much clearer reception. Recently, Sagarmatha and BBC entered into a special arrangement for the production of a fifteen-minute program exclusively for Nepal, and the airing of this program exclusively by Radio Sagarmatha. Apart from BBC’s half-hour-long *The World Today* program in English, all of Radio Sagarmatha’s programs are in Nepali.

Radio Sagarmatha’s two most popular programs are the two-hour-long *Our Valley*, its flagship program, which opens the day’s broadcast at 7:00 a.m., and the half-hour-long *Aja Ko Kura* (Of Talk) in the evening. The first consists of news, current affairs, and interviews on issues; the second, news and commentary. Such programming has won the hearts of a wide cross-section of listeners in Kathmandu and its suburbs. Sagarmatha has an independent listeners’ fan club and a growing list of supporters.

Koirala takes pride in Radio Sagarmatha’s being the only station with serious programs in the country and its being a good model for a public-service station. Indeed, visitors to

the station are impressed not only by its good programming but also by its lean staff structure and its volunteers. By the year 2000, Radio Sagarmatha was broadcasting fourteen hours a day—seven hours in the morning and seven in the evening—and moving towards digitization and computer networking.

Through Radio Sagarmatha, Koirala and his colleagues in the consortium paved the way for the establishment of other noncommercial or community radio stations in other parts of the country. Despite experiencing bureaucratic delays in the issuance of licenses and what Koirala describes as the uncooperative attitude of the administration, four such stations, all self-supporting and operating outside Kathmandu, have been set up. These are Radio Madan Pokhara in Palpa district, in the mid-hill region in western Nepal; Lumbini FM in Manigram, also in western Nepal; Mankamana FM at Hetauda, south of Kathmandu; and Koshi FM in the industrial town of Biratnagar in eastern Nepal. All of these stations are part of a network of community radio stations outside Kathmandu that are linked to Radio Sagarmatha. They receive programs from Sagarmatha through the Internet.

To help rural communities set up their own radio stations, and to train their staff and seek financial and technical support, the NEFEJ has established the Community Radio Support Center. Koirala chairs its grants committee. Meanwhile, Koirala and his colleagues continue to try and convince the government of the value of broadcasting in rural Nepal, despite obvious reluctance on the government's part. He remains hopeful about this as more and more rural communities come to realize that grassroots communication is vital to public participation in both democracy and sustainable development.

Aside from the urban-rural divide, there is another aspect to democratizing Nepal that troubles Koirala. Brahmins, being privileged both materially and intellectually, control many aspects of Nepalese society and occupy virtually all key positions in the country. Some of them, like Koirala himself, are aware that perpetuation of this tradition will not be healthy for Nepal. He says, "It's people like ourselves, the Brahmin editors, who are saying, 'The media in this country will not make any progress as long as we are here. We have to bring in others. We have to bring in women. We have to bring in the minorities. In journalism. In key positions in journalism. Then only will we make real progress.'"

Looking back, what does Koirala make of his experience in bringing social and economic development to Nepal through communications? His answer: "The more I work in communication, the more I . . . realize that without communication, social and economic development is not possible. Nor can a democracy function unless there is a free flow of information between individuals, communities, and various sectors of society.

"Something that has become fully evident from these small grassroots exercises is that if communities are given the responsibility to handle their own communication, there is immediate impact. . . . Communication that is of the people, by the people, and for the people is more durable, more sustainable, and more effective than communication managed by large corporate bodies or the government. . . . It has been proven that rural communities can handle their own information and use it effectively to improve their lives."

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