

Ideological Othering of Maoists in *The Kathmandu Post*

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Abstract

This paper explores representation of Maoists in *The Kathmandu Post* during and after People's Movement II, especially after 12-point understanding between Seven Party Alliance (SPA) and the Maoists in Delhi. By utilizing Althusserian notion of ideology, particularly his notion of Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and media ethics, the paper critically scrutinizes why *The Kathmandu Post* epitomized Maoist and the movement the way it did. The paper claims that the Post's depiction of Maoists is basically motivated by their economic position, ideology and vested interests which are contrary to the notion of ISA. Further, the research also substantiates that Althusserian conception of ISA does not apply in the context of Nepal. *The Kathmandu Post's* explicit support to People's Movement II and at the same time misrepresentation of Maoists despite 12-points agreement between Maoists and SPA undercuts Althusser's notion.

Key Words: Maoists, People's Movement II, ideology, The Kathmandu Post, representation, media ethics

1. Introduction

This article deals with representation of Maoists in *The Kathmandu Post* during and after People's Movement II, particularly after 12 point agreement mated out between Seven Party Alliance (hereafter SPA) and the Maoists.

The paper justifies that *The Kathmandu Post* being complicit with mainstream ideology – ideology spread by the then King Gyanendra Shah – directly or indirectly, represented Maoists as the other by taking the propaganda spread by the then King Gyanendra Shah for granted that Maoists “missed the way,” are “terrorist” and “anti-nationals.”

Such misrepresentation and othering of Maoists by *The Kathmandu Post* is mainly because of the economic interest of the media and its faith in multiparty democracy. The Post is found to have treated different political parties of equal footing from different vantage points, which is unethical.

Rigorous study of different theories ranging from media ethics, representation and ideology and their application to news reports of *The Kathmandu Post* proves how Althusserian notion of Ideological State Apparatus fails in the context of Nepal.

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2. Ideology, Representation and Media Ethics

The paper employs Althusserian notion of ideology as research lens which is considered as a dominant concept in media studies. Ideology is defined as a “body of ideas characteristic of particular social group or class” or “ideas which help to legitimate dominant political power” (Eagleton 1). However, for Marx it is “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group” (Quoted in Althusser 120). Althusser connects Ideology to production in this regard.

Ideology for Althusser does indeed represent but what it represents is the way I ‘live’ my relations to society as a whole, which cannot be said to be a question of truth and falsehood. Ideology for Althusser is a particular organization of signifying practices which goes to constitute human beings as social subjects, and which produces the lived relations by which such subjects are connected to the dominant relations of production in a society. (Eagleton 18)

In ideology, geography, time specific values and interests are projected as the values and interests of all humanity. Legitimacy of ideology is achieved through universalizing and eternalizing itself.

Though most of the philosophers agree on the nature of ideology, they also have contending views. When Althusser defines ideology as ‘false consciousness,’ Foucault associates it with discourse. For scholars like Foucault “ideology is a matter of discourse rather than language” (9), writes Eagleton. For Foucault “ideology is a function of the relation of an utterance to its social context.” (Eagleton 9)

Louis Althusser, in his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus,” describes television, radio and press as “the communication ideological state apparatus” (111). He conceives the mass media along with institutions like “the schools and the church as ideological state apparatus” (112) vital to upkeep social support for one set of ideological beliefs over another. Althusser further claims in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus” that

[...] it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that ‘men’ represent to themselves in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is at the center of every ideology, i. e. imaginary representation of the real world. (124)

For Althusser, representation is the key component in ideology. In representation “what matters is not so much what is said, but who says it to whom for what purpose” (110). Representation is also central in media studies because it is closely linked to the issues of depicting reality.

What we read in newspaper will be a construction, involving decisions about what to select for printing, how to edit and present the material. Roger Fowler in his book, *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the press* acknowledges news not as the representation of reality, rather a social construct (203). Similar to Fowler, John Hartley in his book *Understanding News* very constructively places the usual contemporary accounts of the news as a social and ideological produce (21).

In order to avoid publishing ‘slander and errors’, most codes concentrate on matters to do with the provision of reliable information and on avoiding distortion, suppression, bias, sensationalism and the invasion of privacy, but some codes go even further. In order to avoid bias and center the profession to ‘social interest’ “media [is expected] to follow agreed codes of ethics and professional standards” (McQuail 124). Breaching ethical code of conduct “...will then cease to be of use to society, and

cease to have any real reason for being [and] ... for the sake of all of us, must never be allowed to happen” (Biagi 328).

Taking into consideration the freedom of press and its responsibility towards social welfare, different organizations like International Federation of Journalism (IFJ) and others have forwarded their codes of conduct. One of the major functions prescribed by Hutchins Commission is that “the press should offer a representative picture of constituent group in society, that is, no stereotyping” (Acharya 268). Likewise, Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) in its ethics stresses: “Journalists must be free of obligation to any interest other than the public’s right to know the truth” (Biagi 339). To restrict journalists exploiting press freedom and creating propaganda, IFJ code of conduct proposed: “the journalists shall not suppress essential information or falsify documents” (Acharya 268).

Similarly, Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) focusing on professional ethics, stresses that “Journalists must be free of obligation to any interest other than the public’s right to know the truth” (Biagi 339). Moreover, International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism drawn up by UNESCO highlights the “... respect for human rights, social progress, national liberation, peace, democracy” (McQuail 125). Most importantly, SPJ code stresses on “giving voice to the voiceless” (Acharya 270). Due respect to ethical principles minimizes the possibility of misrepresentation and falsity in news.

Many analysts have argued that news cannot simply reflect the reality as it occurs, but most inevitably represent events and ideas in particular ways. This is because “news like any other texts, is socially constructed that produces versions of reality” (Tuchman 2). News construct a particular version of event, where the version is shaped by a wider context. Even state explicitly controls news output and is able to disseminate what is, in fact, propaganda. Not only state, even in independent professional media, as said by Herman and Chomsky, “the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what general populace is allowed to see, hear and think about and to manage public opinions by regular propaganda campaigns” (Fowler 6). News thus becomes a means for the ruling group to control ideas in society. Media constitutes dominant ideology and serves ruling elites.

3. Media, Its Scope and Impact

As a powerful socializing agent, media can affect the political, social and cultural institution. Taking the reference of industry estimates, Shirley Biagi in *Media Impact* pens that “the average adult spends more than half of his or her waking life with the media” and “64 percent of all adults read a daily newspaper” (4) in the USA. The influence of Media cannot be underestimated even in the context of Nepal.

Considering the impact of media in the lives of the people, Denis McQUAIL highlights the social responsibility of media:

The media are widely expected to serve the “general welfare” or “public interest” whether by design or not. This means, in practice, that mass media are not the same as any other business or service industry, but often carry out some tasks which contribute to the wider and larger term benefit of society as a whole, especially in cultural and political matters, over and above their own ostensible organizational goals (135).

For McQUAIL, primary responsibility of journalism is to inform people about social affairs, keeping their economic interest aside. Similarly, International Federation of Journalist (IFJ) adopted a nine-

point declaration by the world congress of IFJ in 1954 as the code of conduct in which it primarily declared that “respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of journalists.” (Acharya 268)

Responsible and neutral press is significant not only for the society but also for politicians. However, the freedom of expression and views and news in media are instrumentalized for petty selfishness. When utilized properly, freedom of press can be “that liberty which guards our other liberty” as said by Thomas Jefferson (Quoted in Tuchman 27). Yet, if misused, “... a noble enterprise could degrade itself by publishing slander and errors” (Quoted in Tuchman 27).

4. Representation of Maoists in *The Kathmandu Post*

A rigorous analysis of news on Maoists produced by *The Kathmandu Post* before and after 12 point agreement meted out between SPA and Maoists demonstrate the news being complicit to ex-King’s propaganda campaign implicitly, though the newspaper supported the movement backed by SPA.

Ex-King Gyanendra Shah dismissed the then government under the prime minister Shri Sher Bahadur Deuba, declared state emergency and seized the fundamental rights of the people. The security forces remanded political leaders and independent press was somehow taken into control by the army. Though he proclaimed that his move was for “restoration of sustainable peace and exercise in meaningful democracy” (Feb. 1, 2005) his real intention behind the coup was overtly political ambition to exercise unlimited power; though he declared that the move was mandatory and blamed all the political parties for “bloodshed, violence and devastation [that] pushed the country to the brink of destruction” (Feb. 1, 2005).

He tried to achieve legitimacy of his move by pointing that it was necessary for effective tackling of the Maoist “terrorists” who, in his own words, “missed the way taking up arms against the nation and people, and are engaged in criminal activity against democracy” (Feb. 1 2005). He declared them “terrorists” and warned: “Nepal is committed to eliminating terrorism in her own interest as well as in the interest of democracies around the world. Nepal aspires for peace – of herself, her neighbors and South Asia and to rid the world from the threat to peace” (Feb. 1, 2005).

His rhetoric explicitly hinted that he wanted to secure legitimacy from neighboring countries and the super powers (especially USA). His ideology was to convince the world that his move would contribute to “global peace process” and his rhetoric was the copy of George W Bush’s declaration in White House that war against Iraq was the war against terrorism. Different media houses in the country took his ideology for granted and were influenced directly or indirectly.

It was obvious for *Nepal Television*, *Gorkhapatra Daily* and *The Rising Nepal* to be mouth piece of the government after royal regression as they were funded by the state. These media made ruling ideology as their directive principle for agenda setting in news as ISA. However, it was quite surprising for academics to witness *The Kathmandu Post* being complicit with the ruling ideology concerning Maoists’ representation.

Such case is evident in the news report of the statement made by Maoist chairman, Prachanda, to media on 16 March 2006. The Post published a news titled “ICRC OHCHR vehicles won’t be attacked” where the spirit of the statement is intentionally distorted like in its lead. The news reads:

KATHMANDU, MARCH 15 (PR) – Maoist Chairman Prachanda said on Wednesday that his party wouldn't attack any vehicles of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights during any Maoist-called strikes.

In a statement issued to media, Prachanda said, “we want to make it clear that there will be no obstruction from our side in the movement of ICRC vehicles, ambulances of Nepal Red Cross and OHCHR vehicles during general strike, banda, blockades, and chakka jam called by us in any part of the country.”

The Maoist supremo has also said his party would also allow ICRC and OHCHR to meet with persons taken under their control.

Here, even though Prachanda clarified that “there will be no obstruction from [their] side in the movement of ambulances of Nepal Red Cross, ICRC and OHCHR vehicles during general strike, “banda”, blockade, and “chakka jam” called by [them] in any part of the country.”, what the post did was to distort his statement as: “Maoist chairman Prachanda said on Wednesday that his party would [not] attack any vehicles [...] during any Maoist called strike.” Here the term “obstruct” is replaced by “attack” which is more negative than the previous. Replacement of the term is intentional and it means a lot. As stated by Roger Fowler in his book *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press*, “selection of one term over another and transformation of news are guided by the belief system and ideology” of The *Kathmandu Post*.

Similar type of whimsical and baseless report entitled “Maoists burn 3 vehicles” is evident in the Post of March 20, 2006. The news without any solid ground blames Maoists for the act. It's totally baseless, one-sided, and imbalanced as it reads: “Meanwhile rebels burnt a passenger bus near Kanepokhari area along the Mahendra highway. The vehicles registered Ko 1 Kha 1626 was in route to Kakarbhatta from Dharan.” Though the incident is true, involvement of Maoists is baseless and imaginary as it is not supported by evidence.

There is stereotypical representation of Maoists in most of the news reports. They are frequently reported for vandalizing buses, placing bombs in school, cutting off electricity and other similar activities so that there will be wide range of public distrust and hatred against them. Such misrepresentation is also evident in a report published on March 20, 2006: “Maoists cut-off electricity to Dailekh.” The report blames Maoists for damaging the national grid and cutting-off the supply.

DAILEKH, March 19 (PR) – Maoists Saturday cut-off electricity supply to Dailekh from Surkhet district by damaging the national grid at Waraha VDC along the Dailekh-Surkhet border. Workers from District Electricity Authority who reached Waraha to repair the damage on Sunday were sent back by the rebel.

The only source for the news is that “workers from District Electricity Authority who reached Waraha to repair the damage on Sunday were sent back by the rebels.” Neither eye witness nor the Maoists opinion is expressed in the news.

Maoists are mostly represented as villains who cut-off electricity, beat people to death for no reason, vandalize buses and place bombs in schools while government, security force and the government officers are presented as rescuer, savior and as a romantic hero. Such stereotypical representation defies the norms of internationally recognized commission on freedom of the press formed in 1947 known as Hutchins Commission that has made clear provision in its code of conduct that “the press

should offer a representative picture of constituent group in society, that is, no stereotyping” (Acharya 268). The news also equally defies IFJ code of conduct that “the journalists shall not suppress essential information or falsify documents” (Acharya 268).

Apart from stereotyping, *The Kathmandu Post* has stressed upon the effects of war instead of paying attention to the real cause behind it. William Ranadolph, a media person, views that “news is something that everyone wants to suppress. Everything else is advertising.” If we analyze news from the vantage point of Ranadolph, most of the news reports concerning Maoists are advertising (propaganda).

Most of the reports seem like gossip and imaginary stories, which is reminiscent of Biagi, who in *Media Impact* argues that “Members in the press sometimes print gossip as truth, disregard the impact they have on people’s lives, and are ready to believe the worst about people because the worst sells ... we in the media have much to answer for” (327).

Similarly, another report entitled “Maoists set ablaze govt. offices” published on March 21, 2006, blamed the Maoists for setting fire and looting the sum of 15 thousand rupees from the custom office Bithamod without solid evidence. Such news is frequent in *The Kathmandu Post*.

The way discourse is created and Maoists are represented is enough to justify that Post functioned as ideological state apparatus to maintain the status quo. *The Kathmandu Post* became complicit to state ideology that the Maoists “missed the way” are “engaged in criminal activity against democracy, took up arms against the nation, people, and therefore are terrorists.” Most importantly, the Post solely relying on the Public Relation Directorate (PRD) of the then Royal Army for the formation of news validates its complicity with repressive state apparatus.

Such distortion of discourse enables institutions to wield power and dominate by defying and excluding ‘the other.’ Discourse is related with power structures operating in society. Discourses are rooted in social institutions and that social and political power operates through discourse. The Royal regime of ex-King Gyanendra used social institutions like press, radio, television, religious forums for creating discourse and discourse practice. *The Kathmandu Post* has worked with complicity in defining Maoists, though indirectly, as ‘terrorists’ and exclude them as ‘the other.’

Most of the news reports are structured in the same stereotypical format in which Maoists are represented as fighting the losing battle. Such propaganda is evident in the following news entitled “24 Maoists, 10 security men, 1 civilian among dead.”

In Dhading district, 21 Maoist rebels died during a major offensive launched by the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) Chautara Tuesday morning in Darechowk VDC – 6, an area bordering Chitwan district, the Ministry of Defense (MoD) said.

According to a press communiqué from the ministry, 21 bodies of the rebels have been recovered so far and losses on the rebel side could be much higher.

Such propaganda is disseminated to recover the defeated mentality of the Army and to collect support from a handful of upper class people, international community and the parties of parliamentary system.

The Post has considered the press communiqué as a reliable source of the news, and has hardly given any space to Maoist’s opinion on the issue. As Roger Fowler states in *Language in the News*:

Discourse and Ideology in the Press, representation of Maoists is not a value free reflection of reality rather it is patterned by the structure of values, social and economic in its origin, and these values are non-other than bourgeois. News in the Post is representation in this sense of construction; it is not a value free reflection of ‘facts.’

The final theoretical point of the analysis, is that each particular form of linguistic expressions in the Post – wording, phrasing and syntactic option among others – has its reason. The reason is to suppress the voice of Maoists. Though there are alternative ways of saying the same thing, *The Kathmandu Post*’s particular choice has significance.

Baseless news motivated to defame Maoists is evident even in the Post’s news of March 24, 2006: “Maoists open fire in crowded bus park.” The news was published after the 12 point agreement meted out between Seven Party Alliance (SPA) and Maoists. The news lacks even fundamental ethical codes accuracy, balance and credibility (ABC). The news is groundless, invalid and propagated one which is intended to defame Maoists and break the tie between Maoists and SPA.

After the 12 point understanding meted out between Maoists and SPA on November 22, 2005, both SPA and Maoists were rebels as they actively rejected to involve in the election of municipality. They not only defied election, but also initiated People’s Movement II against the government. Even though all the eight parties have equal footing after the agreement, the Post has used the term ‘rebel’ to Maoists whereas parties in the SPA are termed with their names.

Stereotyping, othering and exclusion continued even after People’s Movement II. *The Kathmandu Post*’s reliance on Directorate of Public Relation of Royal Nepal Army for news story and continuation of referring them as rebel can be traced in the news entitled “Rebels abduct 5 APF men” dated May 11, 2008 and “Maoists continue abduction” dated May 8, 2006.

5. Ideological Othering of Maoists in *The Kathmandu Post*

To Conclude, *The Kathmandu Post* by taking the ideology of the then government for granted that “Maoists missed the way” by engaging in criminal activities against the government, people and democracy, represented Maoists as if they were the criminal group. The Post became complicit to the ideology of ex-King Gyanendra not because it was in favor of coup, but because it was against Maoists as they had a different ideology. Therefore, *The Kathmandu Post* by distorted representation of news coverage about Maoists reproduced the discourse created by the then King Gyanendra Shah. Such discourse formation enabled *The Kathmandu Post* to wield power and dominate by defining Maoists, though indirectly, as ‘terrorist’ and exclude them as ‘the other.’ The Post’s compliance to the mainstream ideology can be substantiated by its complete reliance on the Directorate of Public Relation of Army as a reliable source for news. The Post took the press communiqué as the main reliable source of the news, spread such propaganda as truth and it hardly gave space for Maoists views.

The ultimate point the researcher wants to make is that media representation of Maoists is also not a value free reflection of reality rather it is patterned by the structure of values, social and economic in its origin; and these values are not other than bourgeois. All these news stories are just discourse practices. News in *The Kathmandu Post* is representation in this sense of construction; it is not a value free reflection of ‘facts.’

This analysis also posits that each particular form of linguistic expression in *The Kathmandu Post* – wording, phrasing and syntactic options has its reason which is to suppress the voices of Maoists. Even though there were other alternative ways of saying the same thing; *The Kathmandu Post*'s particular choice has significance. The Post's ideology is explicit in its choice of particular term over other. *The Kathmandu Post* has used the term 'Maoist rebels' to refer to Maoists and 'democratic parties' to other parties like Nepali Congress and CPN (UML) and others even though after 12 point understanding between Maoists and SPA in Delhi, all the parties stood on the same ground as all defied the government's whip to participate in the election of local bodies of the government.

This conscious choice of certain derogatory words instead of other options available is to cater negative impression about the Maoists. Their conscious choice of the term such as rebel represents their ideological bias to the Maoists. In contrast choice of the word "democratic parties" to other seven parties of the alliance represents the Post's ideological affinity to those parties. This kind of double standard employed by *The Kathmandu Post* in representation of the Maoists and other parties of same alliance is evidence of othering and exclusion. The nomenclature of Maoists as rebel by the Post has significance in stereotyping and also reproducing the ideology of the government against them. Such stereotypical representation continued even after People's Movement II even though establishing "loktantra" was almost impossible without active involvement of Maoists.

Misrepresentation of Maoists continued even after the movement. Even though Maoists were not in government immediately after the movement, they had agreed to make journey further through loktantra to republic joining hands with SPA, in this context of consensus and cooperation, to refer Maoists as rebel and misrepresent is unethical and an ample evidence of othering.

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