

Science journalism in South Asia – untapped potential



T. V. Padma

When I was to take over as the South Asia news editor and regional coordinator at SciDev.Net from 1 January 2005, to set up the region's first network of science reporters and generate sustained science news, it was 'baptism by tsunami'. The December 2004 Asian tsunami struck parts of Sri Lanka, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Tamil Nadu coast, before I formally took over. So there I was, with a tsunami on one hand, and with no office roof over my head (it came three months later) or a network of reporters on the other. Much as I would have personally preferred a more sedate initiation into a new job, all's well that ends well. SciDev.Net's coverage of the Asian tsunami went on to bag the prize for best on-line reporting on science at the 2005 Association of British Science Writers (ABSW).

One must, however, not jump to the conclusion that there was, and is, a ready-made body of science journalists across South Asia, along the lines of what we see in more developed countries, or in India. In countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the science journalism picture looks patchy. There are pockets of professional excellence, and there are other pockets of commendable enthusiasm for the field, but with no access to the tools of the trade. SciDev.Net ventured to fill the gaps, while trying to maintain high professional excellence.

Several colleagues repeatedly – and most of them good naturedly – asked me, what news did I hope to generate under such circumstances, and why bother? Also, at that point – as recent as 2005 –

there was scepticism about whether a web-based format could be as serious and credible as a print format. This was despite SciDev.Net's credentials – it was supported by *Nature*, *Science* and TWAS in a unique trilateral arrangement. But the biggest reason for scepticism was that it was a departure from the accepted norm – no top international science publication, after all, published news from, say, Nepal (or indeed Burkina Faso or Papua New Guinea). So, I had apparently taken on a lost case.

Not really. We now live in a globalized, inter-connected world, and the internet is here to stay, offering precisely those easy connections, information access and communication possibilities that did not exist previously. The region is thriving with science news. Pakistan and Nepal have witnessed vigorous debates on genetically modified crops; Bangladesh is embarking on a nuclear power plant even as it fears going under rising sea levels due to climate change and Sri Lanka has an ambitious and focused nanotechnology programme in rubber, tea and textiles. To remain connected and look for collaboration would be pragmatic.

The region also has a pool of science communicators and journalists reporting on agriculture, environment, health and technology, even if publications in some countries do not have a designated science correspondent. The root of this problem, as I found early in my job, lies elsewhere – courses on journalism and mass communication in the national universities of many countries, did not have, at that point, an optional course or paper in science journalism. So journalism students in these countries were unaware of the field. It is a problem I will come back to later in the piece.

Yet reporters, even without a formal job title of science correspondent, made an effort to report on topics connected to science. Climate change continues to be big news... Pakistan's worst-ever floods in 2010, which the UN attributed to global warming; the spectre of rising sea levels around Bangladesh and Bhutan and Nepal facing future melting glaciers.

In Bangladesh, for example, until about 2000, hardly any newspapers published regular science features, but now several dailies have weekly or fortnightly

pages/supplements on agriculture, environment, health, science, technology and information technology, while television channels make forays into computer and information technology (ICT) issues.

In Bhutan, although science coverage per se is minimal, the media does cover health, environment and ICT, often with unanticipated insights. A Bhutanese television journalist once narrated to me how he tried to track the progress of his Government's condom promotion campaign to prevent HIV – only to discover that weavers in rural areas use the condom lubricant as a wax substitute for their weaving threads.

So what yardstick do we use to measure and describe science coverage in the region, be it climate change or nanotechnology? What happens if the news is not from a research journal, or a national or international conference, the two gold standards for professional science reporting? For example, if there is a flood in a country, SciDev.Net guides the local reporter how to interview relevant scientists, say from the meteorology department, and flood forecasting agencies; or disaster warning. It takes patience and understanding, but there will still be a good quality science news at the end of the day, even if not from a reporter with a formal job title of a science correspondent, much less one who ever studied a course in science journalism. It is some beginning.

Other hurdles to science journalism in South Asia are the same elsewhere: some editors claim no demand for science news; and commercial interests of a publishing organization could sideline science, or indeed, any development, news.

As in India, other South Asian countries grapple with issues of science journalism in local languages and accurate translations for technical terms. Scientists are reluctant to talk to the media for fear of being misquoted, while others have to adhere to the hierarchy of public-funded institutions and need permission to talk or provide data to a journalist.

And there are other problems: lack of support systems journalists in the developed world take for granted, for example, organized e-mail alerts and press releases; or absence of regular research updates from press officers (or lack of

press officers in institutions in the first place).

Then try science journalism against the backdrop of prolonged internal conflict, or State-owned media with no freedom of press; as has been the case in some countries in the region.

Yet there are solutions too. Nepal, for example, has a rich culture of community radio, a medium that offers potential to disseminate science news in a local language and without depending on power and the internet. And open-access websites such as SciDev.Net are offering an option for low-cost, accessible, science-news dissemination across developing countries.

Web technology has opened up access to information in unimaginable ways; while blogging, podcasts and multimedia offer newer ways to disseminate infor-

mation. SciDev.Net is launched in June audio slideshows from June, and a couple of the South Asian reporters have turned out to be ace photographers.

No problem is insurmountable, if tackled with the right spirit and patience. I mentioned the absence of trained science journalists, despite a general healthy growth in the number of media outlets in print and broadcast sectors. In 2007 SciDev.Net, with some support from UNESCO organized a small workshop at the Central University, Hyderabad on an on-line module on science journalism, to gather feedback from some editors and journalism teachers. The event primed the interest of journalism teachers from three universities – Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu; University of Colombo in Sri Lanka, and University of Dhaka in

Bangladesh, which have now introduced an optional course on science journalism. A change in a university curriculum does not happen overnight and takes time; University of Dhaka introduced science journalism in 2013, and I interacted with the faculty and students in April. The questions fired by some students about the field left me optimistic... the pool of professional science journalists is set to expand in the region.

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Science for all



Nidhi Jamwal

My experiments with freelance science writing

I never really wanted to be a science writer. While I was still pursuing higher studies, over 15 years ago, I remember finding most articles based on scientific studies or new discoveries to be highly boring and confusing. Such 'science stories' were full of technical jargon, lot of data and lengthy tables. Enough to put off a layperson. So, I thought, being just a writer, sans an adjective, was a career worth pursuing. With this idea in mind, in January 1999, I joined a New Delhi-based environment research group, which also published a news magazine. As it happened, that magazine was not a typical news weekly or a features publication. It was, and still is, India's only

science and environment fortnightly. Working with *Down To Earth (DTE)* changed my perspective towards science writing. Launched more than two decades ago by its founder editor, late Anil Agarwal, *DTE* had a unique objective. Agarwal stated it in the inaugural issue of the magazine: '*Down To Earth* is not the product of a desire to capture a share of the information market. It is the product of a need that we feel within us, a desire to fill a critical information gap'. This gap, Agarwal would tell us, was between highly scientific journals on one end of the information spectrum and regular newspaper stories on the other end of the spectrum. Unfortunately, there was no meeting point. Environment and science was, thus, rarely understood by common people. But, 20 years down the line, science is no more limited to research laboratories or Ph D theses stacked in some dingy corner of a library. Today, science is for all.

Do freelance science writers have a halo around their heads?

Formula for a good science writer, as I read somewhere, is 80% good journalism and 20% aptitude to learn and communicate science. A science writer's job is to first understand scientific discoveries, and then to unpack them through writing

in such a fashion that even a layperson can associate with 'science'. Science affects us all in more than one way; hence, a successful science writer should bring science closer to laypeople. This has been my *mantra* all along.

But, this does not mean that one should not pursue courses dedicated to science journalism. The National Council for Science and Technology Communication under the Ministry of Science & Technology, Government of India has sponsored postgraduate degree and diploma courses in science and technology communication. Such trained journalists definitely have an edge over 'untrained' freelance science writers, as scientists feel more 'comfortable' sharing information with 'science journalists'. But one must remember, in India, most members of the Indian Science Writers' Association are freelancers.

Then and now

I worked with *DTE* for almost 11 years, and for the last three years, I am working as a freelance writer. In these 14 years of my journalism career, I have seen a sea change in the way 'science' reporting is done in India. From the days when science and environment articles rarely made it to the front page of a daily, to now when it is hard to read a national