

The BBC Nepali Service: an expression of concern

3 May 2011

The Executive Committee of the Britain Nepal Academic Council, which consists of academics from the universities of Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Leeds, Limerick, London and Oxford and from the Centre of Nepal Studies UK, wishes to express its serious concern over the BBC World Service's recent decision to discontinue broadcasting its Nepali service on short wave frequencies. We believe that this decision should be reviewed in the light of the following:

i. The BBC Nepali Service broadcasts to a regular listenership of approximately 5.4 million in Nepal, i.e. approximately one fifth of the population of a country with which the United Kingdom has a longstanding formal relationship of considerable strategic importance. Nepal is undergoing a prolonged period of political instability and the BBC is trusted above all other media for its provision of balanced and unbiased coverage of events in Nepal and the wider world. The termination of the shortwave service will lose the BBC Nepali Service approximately one third of its audience inside Nepal.

ii. While a part of the audience inside Nepal that listens to the BBC on shortwave will probably manage to access it via local FM radio broadcasts or online in future, many listeners reside in remote mountain areas where there is no FM coverage and no internet access. Thus, the termination of this service will have a disproportionate impact on people who are already starved of news.

iii. Ending the SW service will also mean that the large number of Nepali speakers who live outside Nepal will only be able to listen to broadcasts via the internet, to which the vast majority have no access. The FM solution available in Nepal, whereby local FM stations re-broadcast BBC programmes, is not applicable in India, where FM radio stations are not permitted to broadcast news content. The Indian audience for the BBC Nepali Service is drawn from:

- Several million Indian nationals of ethnic Nepali ancestry who form the majority in Sikkim and the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, and a significant minority in each of the hill states of North East India;
- The very large number of Nepali nationals working in the major cities of India (Delhi, Mumbai etc.);
- The approximately 1 million unskilled and semi-skilled Nepali nationals working in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other countries of the Middle East. This is of particular concern given recent political events in the Arab world and the vulnerability of migrant workers in this region.

While we are fully cognisant of current constraints on all areas of public spending, we draw your attention to the Sixth Report of the House of Commons' Foreign Affairs Committee on 'The implications of cuts to the BBC World Service' ordered to be printed on 4 April 2011 [<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmfaff/849/84902.htm?intcmp=239>].

In particular, we endorse the Committee's suggestion that some of the activity of the BBC World Service contributes to the broader aims of DFID and that the possibility of utilising an element of the DFID budget to protect specific elements of the Service should be explored.

The BNAC would be happy to contribute to any discussion of the future of the BBC Nepali Service.

Yours faithfully

Michael Hutt

Professor of Nepali and Himalayan Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, London

Chairman, Britain Nepal Academic Council

Email: mh8@soas.ac.uk