

Social Media Facilitates Local Governance

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While growing up in a remote village in central Bhutan, farmer Namgay would hear villagers calling each other at the top of their voices for village meetings. He would also walk miles with his father, who was a chipon (messenger), to drop off official letters and messages at nearby villages.

Today, the 43-year-old is himself a chiwog (unit of counties) tshogpa (representative), but unlike his predecessors, he does not have to walk through leech and snake-infested trails to call people for meetings. In the age of technology, he uses social media to correspond with villagers and officials.

Namgay conveys all official messages, and even calls people for zomdus (village meetings), through the group chats. “Even if people have issues they want tshogpas to raise in the gewogs, most convey them through social media,” he said, and added that people even complained about service delivery and held local leaders accountable through social media.

“We use Telegram to correspond with dzongkhag officials and Wechat with farmers,” Namgay said. He explained that people shared various group chats — an overall one for the chiwog, and others for specific matters like cleaning programmes and rituals in the community.

With about 90 percent of the Bhutanese population on social media, seeking information and entertainment, local government (LG) officials are using it to convey important messages, and even conduct virtual Zomdus. Rural residents and voters are also using social media to impose checks and balances, question authorities, and demand accountability.

According to a former National Council member, Tharchen, who works closely with local government, and heads the Centre for LG which trains local leaders to build their competency, social media has become the main medium of communication between citizens and their elected

representatives. He said that it had taken over from word-of-mouth used in the past, as it is faster and more reliable.

Wangduephodrang dzongda (governor), Sonam Jamtsho, said local leaders send official notifications, messages and letters through Whatsapp, Wechat and Telegram. He said that social media apps facilitating voice messages have been useful for communicating with rural residents.

Enhancing Democracy

The gup of Nubi gewog, Pema Lhamo, also agreed that social media was helping people stay informed. She said it had changed the way local leaders engage with people. “With everyone busy with farm work, only one person can attend meetings, but most people are on social media, discussing matters that are important to them and prioritising activities,” she said.

Former MP Tharchen said that social media is promoting democratic culture and public participation in local governance. “It keeps citizens updated on developmental plans and resources allocated,” he said.

He said many people today used social media to connect with elected representatives, helping them to make informed decisions. “Media, social media in particular, helps people understand the government budget, plan and policies,” he said.

A corporate employee in Wangduephodrang, Pema, said social media helped bureaucrats and local leaders to prioritise activities. He cited the example of how a bridge in Wangduephodrang, in dire need of maintenance, was repaired after some residents raised the issue on social media with a photograph. “The bridge would not have been repaired if not for social media,” he claimed.

An employee of an international organisation that works closely with the Department of LG, Lekey Wangdi, said social media was being used as a citizen engagement platform, where some chiwog zomdus (meeting) were being conducted on Wechat. He said that, in a democratic culture, social media facilitated civic engagement, with a two-way flow of information. “Both rural residents and local government (LG) officials benefit from it,” he added.

Services Through Social Media

A gewog administrative officer who has served in local government for more than 15 years, Damcho, said local governments now had their own Facebook pages to update people about their activities, plans and policies. “Social media helps to maintain transparency,” she said. “Gewogs with proactive leaders update their pages regularly, but some gewogs do not use it much.”

She also said social media helped local governance during the pandemic: “We even conducted gewog tshogde (meetings) via social media during the lockdown.” She added that most local leaders reached needy people during the lockdown and provided rations and other necessities by using social media.

Based in the remote Naro gewog of Thimphu, Damcho said local government officials and rural residents benefited from the wide use of social media. “It is useful for finding out where disasters have occurred and what help we can extend. All gewogs have their own Facebook page to share information and interact with citizens,” she added.

Social Media Connectivity and Reach

According to a study conducted by Bhutan Media Foundation, social media is intensively and extensively used in the country, and Bhutanese people spend an average of 163 minutes every day on it. The global average time is 145 minutes a day.

The report stated that 64 percent of Bhutanese people allowed discussions that were previously considered taboo, and 55 percent believed the discussions were aimed at bringing positive changes. While 71.8 percent of the people believed that the public discourse value of social media was high, only 57.1 percent believed that it contributed to strengthening community vitality.

A gewog administrative officer in Dagana, Lobzang Choda, said social media brought everyone together, even people from the gewog who now live outside. “It creates an online community which comes together to do community service,” he said.

He cited examples of how people crowd fund and collect money through Wechat and other social media apps to conduct rituals and other community works.

Challenges of Social Media

While social media penetration and usage is high in the country, there are concerns about its misuse — to spread false information, create confusion and divide the community.

Lekey Wangdi says the first thing Bhutanese people do after reading or watching a social media post is to share it without verifying and authenticating the contents. “There has to be media literacy on effective use of social media,” he added.

During the 2018 elections, social media contents were among the top-most complaints lodged at the Election Commission of Bhutan. The commission objected to 22 Facebook posts. In the last local government elections, most disputes were related to candidates and their supporters who were accused of maligning their opponents on social media.

In Kanglung, Trashigang, a voter registered a case against the gup for threatening him online after the local government election. Without guidelines and social media literacy, people make personal attacks on local and central government leaders via social media groups, share graphic photos, and even instigate fights.

In Baelangdra, Wangduephodrang, a couple saw an online video of their son being beaten by a neighbour’s son. Villagers filmed the fight and uploaded it online. Wangduephodrang police registered the case as an offence against children. The court sentenced those involved.

A civil servant, on the condition of anonymity, said social media was misused during elections: “I sometimes feel people are deliberately doing it to mislead people. It’s educated people who are privy to information who share the anonymous posts.” He said people in rural villages believed Facebook and Wechat content and could not differentiate between social media and mainstream media. “This is dangerous for a small country like ours,” he added.

Social media brings people who live apart together but also divides people who live together. “Everyone stays on their phones and do not talk to each other,” Namgay said. “Even elderly people do not recite prayers, but waste time on Wechat.”

There are also cyber security risks when people are online, be it on social media or any other application. According to an expert in information and technology, Tshering Cijay Dorji (PhD), using social media for official purposes may expose such official accounts to unauthorised users or hackers.

“There are also risks of people misusing official social media accounts, leaking confidential information, and destroying someone’s image,” he said. “People should update and keep abreast with the fast-paced social media interactions.”

Way Forward

Bhutan Media Foundation’s study recommends a mix of regulation and greater advocacy on social media ethics, privacy and security, to promote safe and healthy use of social media. Lekey Wangdi says awareness, education and advocacy on productive use of social media is important. “Aligning social media with local government or central government policies and framework is necessary,” he added.

He said there has to be a framework on how citizens could benefit from social media. Government must invest in social media literacy to help people identify fake news and real news. Local governments should provide objective, accurate and timely information and set the record straight when fake news spreads in the community.

“They should use the government’s social media policy 2016, as it provides comprehensive guidance for the use of social media,” he said.