

# The Pros and Cons of the Traditional Self-help Mechanism: A Story from Shari Gewog, Paro

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## Traditional Self-help Mechanism

Traditional agrarian Bhutanese society relied on locally available self-help mechanisms to address various societal challenges. There were none of the registered civil society organisations (CSOs) which exist today. People relied on naturally formed systems that were based on local needs at the grassroots level in the rural villages in a traditional society.

Coordination, collaboration, and consolidation were important in traditional society and, before the advent of modern development, agrarian Bhutanese society largely depended on self-help and interdependence. They are mostly unwritten rules, procedures, and systems which became the bedrock of the small rural village and gewog communities.

## What is the Difference Between Traditional Systems and Modern CSOs?

It has been more than five decades since the introduction of modern development in Bhutan. During this process of modernisation, along the western development paradigm, the state led development created a societal mindset where people became recipients and government the provider. With the passage of time, the age old traditional ways of collective functioning eroded as the state shouldered most development and administrative functions. Petersen, Dem and Tshering<sup>1</sup> states that the modern state led development has made the rural communities dependent on the government in terms of ownership of development activities in the villages. This mindset is still prevalent in 21<sup>st</sup> century rural Bhutan.

Modern CSOs emerged over the past decade or two in urban Bhutan. In the early 1970s and 1980s, under royal patronage, modern CSOs such as the National Youth Association of Bhutan and the National Women's Association were introduced to address simple societal needs including entertainment and serious ones encompassing women's empowerment. Modern CSOs were not a replacement for the retreating traditional self-help mechanism. There is no continuity of the

<sup>1</sup> Petersen, Stephen, Dem, Rinzin and Tshering, Jit, 2000, Decentralisation and Participation at the Geog and Community Levels, RIM, Thimphu, page

traditional self-help mechanism with the modern concept of CSO. The old and the new did not connect in terms of theory and practice. Therefore, the origin of the CSO sector in Bhutan was a top down initiative to fill in the gaps in the wake of the breakdown of the interdependent traditional social systems.

## **Past and Present Practices in Shari Gewog, Paro Dzongkhag**

This paper looks at the villages of Ramna and Dhuezhi in Shari Gewog where people are still bound together by collective traditional practices including sharing drinking and irrigation water and labour exchange arrangements during peak farming seasons such as paddy transplantation, weeding, and harvest.

### **Sharing Irrigation Water**

The unwritten rule of sharing an equal (proportionate to land size) amount of irrigation water during paddy transplantation is still in practice in villages of Dhuezhi, Ramna and Juka. The farmers take turns to use irrigation water based on the size of individual land ownership. The water is usually shared for one to two days each. This traditional practice still continues because it addresses practical agrarian needs. There were times when local people experienced water conflicts when individual water pipes were deliberately cut off. However, after instituting the unwritten water sharing rules, conflicts related to water were solved. One of the former Shari Gup initiated this arrangement. A water sharing meeting was held in which each person from every household participated. The meeting agreed to share water equally between the individual land owners.

### **Community Support During Illness and Death**

During the time of illness and death in a family, the local people of Ramna and Dhuezhi visit each other and offer moral support. People offer both human resource and support in kind such as rice, cheese, and milk to the bereaved family. The unwritten practice is to take about five *dres* of rice, Nu 50 as *raykap* for the dead, and Nu 50-100 as *semso* to the affected family. This practice is based on the principle of reciprocity. If a family fails to offer support to a needy family, it will not receive support. Traditionally, during death, one person from each household in Shari gewog would go to support the bereaved family. The support is given to help with firewood, organising monks to conduct death rituals, assist in the rituals, cooking, and other important practices. This is still continued today, thus maintaining the community spirit.

About 48 years ago, there was a spiritual practice of chanting *mani* - that is, chanting of the *Om Mani Padmi Hum mantra* - to invoke compassion of Bodhisattva Cherezig for the dead. It was a helpful spiritual practice for the deceased and the bereaved family. There were experienced *mani* chanters in the villages. They were lay men and women who had the knowledge and experience of chanting *mani*.

Usually, the chant is carried within 21 days of a person's demise. Each person from a household contributes in chanting. It is held from dusk, about 6 PM, until people retire for the night, that is 9 PM. Different kinds of chants were sung. They are called *Mani Chig Dang*, *Nyi Dang*, *Bardo Mani*, *Nyensong Yardron* and *Danakhosha* chants. They are all meant to help the departed person's consciousness overcome the hardships during *Bardo* (intermediate state). The neighbours voluntarily take turns to serve tea and snacks for the *mani* chanters.

However, this practice became eroded during the process of development with modern educated youth migrating out of the villages. The old values died with old people. Today, no one in the villages practice it. However, people from Dhuezhi village maintain the custom of visiting the sick in their village. Depending on the sick person's state, they visit their fellow villagers either at home or in the hospital. The visit is made in groups. Therefore, there is a certain degree of community feeling. The people in Ramna village visit individuals based on personal relationships and the relationships are more individualistic.

### **The Labour Exchange System: Past and Present and Its Impact on Village Life**

Traditionally, the people from Paro dzongkhag depended on neighboring Haa dzongkhag for manual labourers during peak farming seasons such as paddy transplantation and harvest. The Haap workers were paid in kind (rice) based on their labour contribution. The labour supply was plentiful as the Haaps brought along even their children to work on farms. However, when most people from Haa took to trading as a main livelihood about 20 years ago, the local people in Paro introduced a labour exchange system as a self-help mechanism. Individual households support each other as farm workers, based on reciprocity, in terms of number of workers and use of farm machineries such as the power tiller. The labour exchange system is still in practice in Shari Gewog.

However, in the face of farm labour shortage, with most young people studying, working, and living outside the villages, some households hire farm labour and pay in cash. At present, the rate is Nu 500 per day. Thus, modern development has negatively affected the adequate supply of farm labour. Before the advent of modern development, none of the children went to school and all stayed home. As a result, there was adequate and a continuous of supply of farm labour in villages. The young also provided additional support to the homes by collecting firewood from the community forest, caring for cattle, and fetching drinking water for the house. Besides, the village social life was rich with active youth engagement during the less demanding seasons. The young had the platform to meet and socialise. The girls often entertained with folk songs and dances and boys played traditional sports. Village life was lively. This is no longer in practice and older people in the villages are nostalgic about those days.

## Drinking Water Supply, Waste Management, and Local Action to Address Drug Abuse

Modern development helped access clean drinking water at Ramna village. About 40 years ago, people used the local Dochu river for drinking and washing for both human and animals. The river was pristine and well looked after. The river is still revered as the blessed water or *drupchu*, flowing from the sacred and famous *nyes* (sacred sites) above Shari Gewog such as Chimpfu, Ragoeth and Drakgothpang Tsho. These sacred sites are associated with wisdom, Dakini Dorji Phagmo and Guru Rinpoche, two highly respected figures in Vajrayana Buddhism. Senior citizens in Ramna still feel strongly about preserving Dochu's purity.

However, there are incidences where the commercial interests and entrepreneurial tendencies associated with modern development have taken away local goodwill. For example, an innovative member of Shari Gewog took the initiative to renovate the local drinking water tank for the villages of Dhuezhi and Jeeba at an affordable cost, based on local people's financial capacity. A few persons who had commercial interests objected to it. This issue resulted into a disagreement between the two groups of people.

The increased human settlements upstream have now polluted Dochu. Modern household waste is not managed well and local people and visitors often dispose of waste in the river and nearby forests. Therefore, modern CSOs such as the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN) and Clean Bhutan's waste management and civic advocacy is useful. At present, the gewog administration organises monthly cleaning programmes. One person from each household participates in the village efforts to collect trash, clear bushes, and dispose of waste. In August, 2017, for example, the gewog uprooted marijuana plants in each village to prevent marijuana abuse by the local youth, particularly the high school students. In recent years, the local people observed high school students from the nearby school and youth from Paro town smoking marijuana plants which grow in abundance in the wild.

## Community Engagement in Spiritual Festivals

In general, Paro is regarded as a sacred place with many ancient Buddhist pilgrimage sites. Shari is at the heart of it with three such pilgrimage sites in the neighbourhood. Senge Drak is a holy site dedicated to the lion-faced Dakini, Sengkhamukha, and Guru Padmasambhava. There is a small community monastery which is being looked after by Jeeba village. The people take turns with the caretaker's responsibility.

Jeeba is a small village located right at the foot hill of Senge Drak. The settlement consists of old and immigrant settlers from other parts of Bhutan. The village organises annual *Nu-nye*, a strict practice dedicated to Cherizing at Senge Drak.

Individual households contribute cash and kind to conduct the *Nu-nye*. In addition, very recently, the village chanted the *sutra* with collective community support. This annual programme was not conducted for several years due to financial constraints. In August, 2017, an active member of the village took the responsibility of mobilising donations in cash and kind from within and outside the village and successfully completed the *sutra* recitation. Each household contributed about Nu 700 in cash and provided support in the form of firewood, rice, butter, cheese, vegetables, and labour for cooking and serving. Also, Jeeba village organises a monthly cleaning and waste disposal programme.

The local *gomchens* (lay monks) are invited to conduct the annual *Lochhoe* in some homes in the villages of Kempa, Dhuezhi and Jeeba. There are a few *gomchens* and monks from other parts of Bhutan who have settled in Shari gewog and they also offer their spiritual services to the local people.

### **Building Houses and Local Bridges: a Dying Custom**

During old times, people in Shari gewog helped each other build houses. There was no state rule to obtain wood permits, as is required today, and it was very easy to access wood for building. Except for the practice of hiring a local carpenter, *zow*, who was well paid in kind and some cash, the people contributed physical labour to build each other's houses. But this practice is dying in the face of modern ways of building houses.

Further, traditionally, the villages of Damji and Ramna were interdependent as a *chiwog* (a group of house make up a *chiwog*. All *chiwogs* make up a *gewog*). The two villages built a wooden bridge near Ramna across the Dochu river. Ramna village, a lone single settlement, relied heavily on Damji village which is located nearby. The bridge was a vital connection with neighbouring villages which are located across the river. The people in the *chiwog* used the bridge to collect firewood from the community land in Dorsekha, Dorochu, and Nyetsekha which are located above Shari village. At present, the government is in the process of building a new concrete bridge following the expiry of the old bridge's life span. A temporary wooden bridge was constructed for public use until the completion of the new bridge. The Dochu bridge is indispensable for daily public use. Many important public offices located in Shari gewog and in the vicinity of the dzongkhag administration use the bridge.

### **Caring For the Sick**

Prior to modern health care services, during illness, people sought advice and services of the local *tsip* (astrologer) to cure illness in the villages. In addition, people conducted community *rimdro* to ward off epidemics at the local Rimdro Lhakhang, located in the centre of Kempa village. Like Senge Drak monastery above Jeeba village, Rimdro Lhakang is community owned and managed. The

people take turns to be the *rimdro* patron and contribute physical labour, food, and other logistic support.

About 20 years ago there was a tradition of appeasing village *Lu*, supernatural beings who are believed to be keepers of earth, water, forest and rocks. The local *parwo* (male shaman) conducted the ritual called *Bonku*. Today, individual households conduct this ritual but it is not done as a community any more. The community sense of conducting common rituals to appease the *Lu* for the communal benefit is completely gone.

According to Petersen, Dem, and Tshering<sup>22</sup> most of the traditional self-help organisations were established to meet the practical needs of the community. “The common element in traditional practices is that, for the most part, they have been established as a result of needs felt by communities and have been organised in ways that utilise existing community resources efficiently and effectively”. A few living traditional practices at Shari Gewog support this argument.

Further, Petersen, Dem and Tshering<sup>33</sup> list many traditional mechanisms practiced by rural societies: communal planting, harvesting, and organising local religious festivals, cremation arrangements, building and maintaining lhakhangs (monasteries), *chortens* (stupas), and *mani dangrems*, building houses, protecting agricultural land, pasture land management, archery or *kburu* tournaments, building and maintaining irrigation canals, protection of religious artifacts, production and marketing groups, breeding bull management, community forest plantation, drinking water management, and footpath maintenance. These show that traditional self-help instruments were community based arrangements which demonstrated coordination, collaboration, and consolidation. This implies a certain degree of sustainability bound by interdependence and mutual benefit.

## Community Governance: Inclusive or Exclusive?

Public life in traditional society was male dominated. Prior to the introduction of local governments like the *Gewog Tshogde*, village elders known as *goshey-nyenshey*, meaning individuals who can understand and listen well, and were informal local village leaders. They were normally men. Women played quiet private roles, shouldering child bearing, rearing and tending to manual farm work. This ethos is carried on even today. The elected gewog administrative and informal leaders are mostly men.

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2 Petersen, Stephen, Dem, Rinzin and Tshering, Jit, 2000, Decentralisation and Participation at the Geog and Community Levels, RIM, Thimphu, page 6

3 *ibid*

## Conclusion

Prior to the emergence of the modern civil society organisations (CSOs) that exist today, traditional agrarian Bhutanese society relied on locally available interdependent and self-help mechanisms to address various societal needs and challenges. They were organised according to unwritten rules, procedures, and systems which became the bedrock of life and functioning of the small rural village and gewog communities.

At Shari gewog in Paro, people are still bound together by collective traditional practices. This entails sharing drinking and irrigation water, labour exchange arrangement during peak farming seasons including paddy transplantation, weeding and harvest, caring for the sick and the dead, organising community spiritual festival, building houses and bridges and, in recent years, managing waste. The community based civic engagement implies societal life based on the principle of interdependence, reciprocity, mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

In addition, Shari's case demonstrates that community leadership and organisation emerged based on existing skills, traditions, and relationships within the community. Although a few good practices died in the face of state-led modern development, some living practices reveal that modern CSOs can emulate self-organised activities. Present CSOs could draw lessons from the traditional self-help mechanisms to build a sustainable and humane society based on the values of interdependence and peaceful coexistence to address common good. This may help build societal leadership, relying on a cooperative spirit to drive coordination, collaboration, and consolidation in society.