

Rise of Media in Bhutan and Its Impact on Democracy

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Introduction

The world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the picture that is drawn for them by the various editors, publishers of papers and other media actors. That in fact, is the power of the media. A liberal democracy works on certain ideals and for Bhutan, to realise them all in so short a time, sounds rather idealistic. Bhutan is currently trying to consolidate its nascent democracy, which indeed is a challenging task. What has been media's role in advancing democratic governance in Bhutan?

Evolution

Centuries back, official and community messengers, prayer flags, carved messages on stone and wood, were the face of the traditional media which kept the people informed on various aspects. With modernisation making inroads in 1962, media got a boost from the monarchy and emerged as an independent force. The first ever national newspaper began its journey in 1986 and since then there has been no looking back. From a weekly, it gradually evolved into a bi-weekly and then into a daily newspaper, only recently in 2009. Likewise the BBS i.e. the Bhutan Broadcasting Service, the first ever national broadcaster to start in 1973, was initially known as the NYAB (National Youth Association of Bhutan).¹ In keeping with the decentralisation process, both the Kuensel (National newspaper of Bhutan) and the BBS were delinked from the Government in 1992, through a Royal Edict, allowing them to function autonomously. In 1998, the Kuensel stopped receiving Government subsidy and in 2006, the paper sold 49 per cent of its shares to the public. Television and Internet entered as late as 1999.² Granting legitimacy to the media was an important move by the monarchy and this was done through the Constitution which was drafted in 2008. Since the Constitution of Bhutan is based on the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), the media also shares the responsibility of working towards this goal.

Three specific rights pertaining to the media are incorporated in the constitution:

- (a) Freedom of speech and expression.
- (b) Right to Information.
- (c) Freedom of Media i.e. Freedom of Press for Radio, TV etc.

The Private Media Makes Its Debut

The credit for the advent of the private media goes to the fifth king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk. The private media raised the bar and did away with the monopoly of the State owned media in various fields. 2006 saw Bhutan Times and Bhutan Observer start off as weekly newspapers. The first Daily newspaper to be launched was Bhutan Today in 2008. In 2010, two more weekly newspapers, Business Bhutan and The Journalist, began publication. In addition to these, private Dzongkha (local) papers and a few entertainment magazines were also launched.³ Private Radio stations are not far behind. Kuzoo FM (launched in 2006), describes itself as the "voice of the youth", Radio Valley (launched in April 2007) is Bhutan's first commercial radio station, which is kind of daring, young and fun. There are others too like Centennial Radio (launched in 2008) and Radio Waves (launched in 2010).⁴

The Growing Reach of the Social Media

Just like rest of the world, the power of the social media in Bhutan is undeniable. Internet has broken down barriers as well as the hierarchical society. The Constitution too was launched on the internet. May 2013 statistics point out that there are 84000 Facebook users and 5000 twitter users for a population under 7 lakhs.⁵ It is no longer the conventional media, but the social media too like, blogging, wikis, video sharing sites like, YouTube and social networking sites like, Facebook and hi5, which are making a difference. Social media allows the people to instantly connect and interact which is so necessary in Bhutan where people in remote and far flung areas are not able to communicate. A commendable act by the media followed the endorsement of the Tobacco Control Act of Bhutan, 2010. A journalist by the name of Kinley Tshering started a Facebook movement called "Amend the Tobacco Act", which went viral enabling people to voice their grievances as well as openly question the Government. This bold initiative by the media and the people finally put pressure on the Government to amend the Act in 2012. ⁶

Role of the Media is Multifaceted

It has educated the public in politics, public affairs, economy, science and technology, music, arts, sports and much more. The media has helped the politically inert to form opinions on several issues and further it has given their opinion a definite shape, a task so important during the phase of Bhutan's gradual evolution to a democracy. In Bhutan, the media's reach is not only urban-centric but it has also regulated people's involvement in the political process in the far flung areas. The illiterate voters bank on the media for information. Television and radio are dominant mediums, made use of by party strategists, for they reach many uncommitted voters, who watch television or listen to radio for other reasons. TV (48 per cent), followed by radio (35 per cent) had the maximum influence on people's choice of representatives, while newspapers had an influence of 11 per cent on the respondents.⁷ Social media like Facebook and twitter also played a vital role during the latest 2013 elections. The good thing about social media is that there are no costs involved and each party has a fan page on Facebook. Thus media is a very important element of political party strategy. The Bhutanese democracy may be just seven years old, however, the Bhutanese media has served as a forum for public debate and analysis as well as criticism and comment by disseminating information and interpreting political events and personalities. Digital forums like Kuenselonline.com are very much in use. The media has come a long way by helping people to engage in meaningful dialogue, national and otherwise by giving rise to democratic discourse, exposing corruption and making institutions accountable.

Bhutan has continually improved in the press freedom index, where, in 2007 it was ranked 116 out of 169 countries. In 2011, it rose dramatically to 64th position, highlighting that Government control over media is disintegrating allowing greater freedom and diversity to prevail.⁸ A conscious media can work towards shaping the right agenda which in turn can help to produce democratic outcomes. The Bhutanese media takes its role seriously as an agenda setter, by calling attention to multidimensional needs and crisis that arise. The media have affected the decision making schedules of policy makers. For example, by giving prominent coverage to particular events or issues, the media have forced governments and politicians to address issues they may have preferred to avoid. In the political arena, the governments have used it for propaganda; political parties use it to gather votes as well as to convey their ideologies and differently, the corporations have used it to sell their products.

One of the biggest contributions of the media in Bhutan as an agent of democratisation has been to keep the Government in check by playing the role of a watchdog and by exposing the Government's misdoings. In June 2010, Business Bhutan broke the story of the Bhutan Lottery scam in India. In the same year, the paper revealed how the Bhutanese cabinet had trespassed the sphere of the Parliament by approving several new taxes on its own. In 2011, another landmark case to be exposed by the media was the Gyalpoizhing land scam in which several bureaucrats as well as the Home Minister and the National Assembly Speaker were found to be guilty. Despite their being a royal decree, that the local administrator cannot give the land away, many influential people including the Prime Minister, got land through unfair means in this town.⁹ The media coverage of important Government decisions have pressurised the Government to think otherwise and halt their policies midway. The last few years are replete with such examples.

The Pay Commission's proposals to hike the pay of senior officials and politicians in 2009 could not come through, thanks to the media coverage and the hype created by it. The Government had to cut a sorry figure in rejecting the report of the Commission. To prevent the common man from bearing the brunt of the Government's high handed policies, the media's timely leak of the proposal by Bhutan's monopoly and state owned companies to double electricity charges, prevented the Government from carrying out their decision. On the contrary the Government went about levying more realistic power charges. Bhutan is a nation which provides free medical care to all its citizens, for which the ministry of health gets money from the Government. A major part of this money is spent by the ministry in procuring drugs and medical equipment every year. This is where corruption has made serious inroads between the international companies along with their middlemen and the corrupt senior bureaucrats in the ministry. The media's tireless efforts in exposing corruption and bringing the guilty to book have earned it the respect of the society at large.

Challenges Facing the Media

Media sustainability and not media growth seems to be the big question in Bhutan. Barring the state owned media houses (BBS) and Kuensel which are state funded, the source of revenue for other media houses depends on government advertisements, which constitute more than 80 per cent advertisements in the market. Therefore, calls for Government subsidies means trading off the media's independence. A unique policy has been adopted by the Government, wherein a daily paper publishing six days a week would receive the same amount of advertisement as a weekly, publishing once a week. Distributing advertisement, while not taking care of quality, content or the reach of newspapers does not augur well for the media industry. Further, the Bhutanese Government has been over expansive in issuing media licenses to all and sundry; too many private newspapers and too small a market. Democracy, no doubt has helped the media grow in terms of the number of agencies but has it also helped professionalism to grow? In fact media agencies have turned far more commercial and market driven with a high dose of entertainment.

Findings of the Bhutan Information and Media Impact Study (BIMIS) 2013.¹⁰ Financial constraints have caused the media to compromise editorial independence and content. Sometimes the media was even politicised and carried partisan views. Besides, balanced coverage is still some distance away. No doubt coverage of rural issues was increasing post 2008, but by and large media coverage is urban centric. There is also the issue of growing plagiarism among Bhutanese journalists which has impacted the quality of service and professionalism in the media industry. The proliferation of media has resulted in duplication and confusion for advertisers in the ethical and fair use of public funds.

A free and independent media adds to the strength of any democratic set-up, but sometimes the Bhutanese Government has faltered. For instance in 2009, when the Chief Editor and Managing Director of Kuensel was appointed Secretary in the Ministry of Information and Communication in the Government, it aroused a fair deal of curiosity, on account of the same person holding a government post as well as managing the most powerful media house in the country. The Ministry of Information and Communications frames policies and regulations; and the Bhutan Information, Communications and Media Authority (BICMA) enforces the regulations. The relationship between the Bhutanese media and the media regulatory body (BICMA) has many times run into rough weather, which impacts the functioning of democracy. In March 2007, the BICMA came out with a code of ethics but this was far from welcome as the media houses put forth that such ethical codes for journalists should be best left to individual media houses. BICMA went to the extent of stopping a newspaper from printing pictures of alcohol beverages as well as pictures of cigarettes, at the height of the Tobacco Act controversy as this would encourage people to smoke.¹¹

A positive development has been the revival of The Journalist Association of Bhutan (JAB). The previous one fizzled out because of the lack of funds. Accessing public information, remuneration and sustainability do pose a challenge in Bhutan. The JAB is now a legally recognised and certified Mutual Benefit Organisation (MBO) under the CSO Act of Bhutan.¹² The Journalists will now be in a better position to explore funds (which was otherwise difficult without legal status) as well as groom reporters and protect them from harassment and litigation from interest groups. The charter of the JAB, which if pursued seriously, will be good for the functioning of democracy.

In this day and age of globalisation, when there are close to two hundred global channels, there is always the risk of the Bhutanese culture being homogenised under the impact of globalisation and this is where the Bhutanese media has to step in i.e. to assimilate the best practices from other cultures and incorporate it in Bhutan's culture thereby making it more diverse, without overwhelming it. Freedom of expression is a reality in Bhutan but because of bureaucratic barriers, sometimes the Bhutanese citizens choose to remain anonymous when interacting with the media

or exposing their views on national issues. Bhutan's democracy has been fortunate because all along the media in Bhutan has had the backing of the monarchy.

Efforts Made by the Monarchy

As mentioned earlier, the monarchy has been very supportive of the media, since the time Bhutan began to modernise itself. On

21 Feb 2010, His Majesty the fourth King used His Royal prerogative of Kidu to launch a Bhutan Media Foundation and provided an initial grant of Nu 15 million to support media development. 13 More recently, on 17 Dec 2011, the 5th King (current King) of Bhutan granted the National Order of Merit (Gold) to each and every media house in the Country to encourage them and laud their efforts, despite their financial constraints. 14

A Word on the Right to Information (RTI)

The media landscape would be incomplete without reference to the RTI Bill. In the case of RTI the initial push came from the media in Bhutan. In India, it was a grassroots feature. The media picked it up strongly as it would open the floodgates of information for the common man. As mentioned earlier, the previous DPT Government did not get the RTI passed, whereas the current PDP Government had it passed in the lower House (National Assembly) and it is now waiting for approval in the Upper House (National Council) because of differences over the bill.

Conclusion

A healthy media is the greatest democratic opportunity for any nation and so it is with Bhutan. A few factors need to be capitalised on: economic sustainability; improved technology; legal enabling environment; better purchasing power; credible content-information is galore and it is important to select intelligently along with political prudence and the desire to serve public interest. A good newspaper is like a nation talking to itself. Raising literacy levels is rather important and Bhutan is gradually developing and the citizens have to be provided with such tools so that they can use the media as autonomous and rational citizens. Online media is more the forte of the literate sections living in urban areas. The Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD) has done some creditable work in this direction like teaching multi-media skills, and covering people in the rural areas. The BCMD has opened media laboratories in Thimphu, where the youth can make use of digital media tools.

Bhutan is a young democracy and the media has to prevent itself from falling into the trap of cynicism, where criticism is prized far more than praise, the sensational over the mundane and methodical and personality over process. The relationship between Bhutan's nascent democracy and the media is one, in which both sides are seeking definition and recognition, and yet each is dependent on the strength of the other. Good beginnings are generally hard, but then well begun is half done. If these two sayings from the yore are any yardstick, then the Bhutanese media may well be on the right track.

Endnotes

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