

Into the Market

Bhutan's consumer-protection authority takes its case on the road

The monks arrived alongside schoolteachers, village administrators, and shopkeepers who had closed their stalls for the morning. The venue was Pelden Tashicholing Shedra in Chhukha Dzongkhag. The subject was the Consumer Protection Act of 2012—and a simple but consequential question: what rights does a consumer have when something purchased turns out to be defective, unsafe, or not as advertised?

The gathering marked the start of a fourteen-day consumer-awareness outreach programme conducted by the Competition and Consumer Affairs Authority (CCAA) from 26 May to 8 June. Operating under the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment, the authority travelled across colleges, schools, gewog administrations, and urban commercial centres, reaching 2,180 participants—1,729 consumers and 451 business entities.

Chhukha was a deliberate choice. Home to Phuentsholing, Bhutan's principal commercial gateway to India, the district sits at the centre of the country's busiest trading corridor. The pace of commerce, the volume of imported goods, and the realities of cross-border trade mean that consumer-protection issues are often encountered here first and felt most acutely.

The programme covered six broad themes.

The first focused on the rights and responsibilities established under the Consumer Protection Act and its implementing rules. Consumers were reminded of their entitlement to accurate pricing, itemised receipts, and clear product information. Businesses, in turn, were briefed on their obligations to display prices, maintain product quality, and ensure the safety of the goods they sell. Although these requirements have long been part of Bhutan's regulatory framework, the discussions suggested that awareness and compliance remain uneven.

A second segment examined unfair trade practices, including misleading advertisements, false product claims, overcharging, and the sale of expired goods. Participants were encouraged to recognise these practices not as isolated inconveniences but as violations of consumer rights.

The programme also devoted considerable attention to digital commerce and financial fraud. As mobile payments and online transactions become increasingly common, consumers face new forms of risk. Officials discussed the dangers of purchasing from unverified online sellers, outlined basic safeguards for secure transactions, and explained the warning signs of pyramid schemes: promises of unusually high returns, earnings dependent on recruitment, and pressure to commit quickly before questions can be asked.

Product safety formed another major component. Particular emphasis was placed on the safe use of LPG cylinders, a practical concern for households throughout the district. Participants were advised on identifying expiration dates, recognising safety markings, and following proper handling procedures.

Tax compliance also featured prominently. Officials clarified that GST may only be charged in accordance with applicable regulations and must be accurately reflected in invoices. The discussion followed reports that some businesses had been applying tax charges inconsistently or outside the prescribed framework.

The final sessions focused on consumer grievance redress. Participants were guided through the process of lodging complaints and informed of the evidence required to pursue a case. Receipts, invoices, and transaction records, officials stressed, are not mere paperwork but the foundation upon which consumer claims are assessed and resolved.

The discussions that followed were often as revealing as the presentations themselves. Participants raised concerns about online scams, discrepancies between shelf and counter prices, and products whose contents or origins did not match their labels. The concerns were familiar. The problems, for many consumers, are readily recognised; the available avenues for addressing them are less widely understood.

The programme's reach was substantial. Gedu College of Business Studies alone contributed 271 participants, while Gedu Higher Secondary School, Darla Higher Secondary School, and Kamji Central School accounted for 273, 275, and 287 participants respectively. Phuentsholing Thromde hosted 269 consumers, while a separate business-focused session brought together 451 traders with support from the Regional Office of Industry, Commerce and Employment. Outreach activities in Chapcha and Bjachho gewogs extended the programme into communities where formal awareness of consumer rights is often more limited.

At the close of the programme, participants requested that similar awareness initiatives be conducted more frequently and expanded to additional gewogs.

That request may be the most significant outcome of all. Consumer protection ultimately depends not only on laws and regulators, but on citizens who know their rights and are prepared to exercise them. In that respect, the programme's success may be measured less by the number of people it reached than by the number who left believing that the marketplace is not beyond their influence.