Darkening Digital Democracy: A Case Study of Manipur Internet Shutdown

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Abstract

North East India possesses a distinctive culture, diversity, ethnicity, and indigeneity, rendering its demographic and geographic characteristics distinct from the rest of the nation yet often disregarded and overlooked by mainstream media. The arrival of cyberspace and other interactive mass media forms has been embraced with means of integration, connecting various national and international entities through the Internet. However, instances of internet shutdowns have raised concerns regarding digital democracy, as India is widely recognized globally for its democratic system, thereby infringing upon the integral rights of people to freely convey their thoughts and ideas, hampering liberty of communication. This research examines the extended period of Digital shutdown in Manipur as a case study to analyze its impact on civil liberties and socio-economic progress within the context of ethnopolitical strife. Given the prominence of social media, this investigation seeks to emphasize its significance as a platform for marginalized voices while also examining how this virtual medium has

compromised their sense of identity rather than contributing to their inclusion in the national sphere in the northeastern portion of India. Consequently, this research will facilitate the exploration of the usage and significant role of social media in the comprehensive progress of North-East India after systematically analyzing the existing discourse. Social media would be taken as a medium for diminishing the negative prejudice attached and facilitating the voice of the marginalized, showcasing themselves on a national and global level. It is argued that social media, when used in a way that is specific to the community, might be a useful instrument for development and has been marked as a powerful tool for empowerment and awareness.

Keywords: *Marginalised, Digital Democracy, Northeastern India, Social Media, Indigenous, Information Society theory, Conspiracy theory*

Digital Democracy and Society

In the current age of the Internet, no entity remains beyond its scope, offering a myriad of support ranging from fundamental communication to educational endeavors, facilitating global connections and cooperation, disseminating information, and staying abreast of developments across various domains, shaping the entirety of human existence. It has brought about transformations in our modes of acquiring knowledge, engaging in recreational activities, and interacting socially. This has all resulted in the evolution of social media and virtual spaces that have enhanced digital life where a significant segment of people is involved in communication and maintains strong connections, leading them to routinely congregate, generate, organize, and disseminate, thereby shaping a digital community and eventually enabling people to promote digital democracy. Hence, the most crucial concern is the presence of an internet connection. As in the hype of the digital world, 'virtual curfews' or 'network shutdowns'—such miscellaneous actions—were taken into account that curb the digital freedom of the country.

In recent years, instances of internet shutdowns have arisen because of various factors, such as amendments to the Citizenship Act, the revocation of Article 370, and most recently, the tribal conflict in Manipur. These events have led to heightened levels of aggression on the internet, prompting the necessity of suspending internet services as a measure to preserve peace, but on the ground level, it has major repercussions.

India and Internet shutdowns

There has been discussion regarding the Indian government's usage of internet shutdowns; since 2012, there have been 752 shutdowns in India, for seemingly insignificant reasons, such as preventing cheating on examinations or admittance into restricted regions (Rajvanshi, 2023). Since 2023, India has ordered up to 84 major internet shutdowns (in Figure 1). Worldwide Internet Shutdown data), shows violation of fundamental rights in the world's largest democracy, putting it first on the list of nations for the sixth consecutive year, according to the #keepitopen report. It's a great tragedy for the world that these disruptions are endangering India's hopes for a digital livelihood, its tech industry, and a country that chairs the G20 (Hindustan Times, 2023). The shutdowns were mandated for several reasons, such as demonstrations, disputes, elections, and school assessments. This practice has increasingly become more prevalent in contemporary times.

According to the report, since 2016, almost 58% of all shutdowns that have been documented worldwide have occurred in India. Such 49 instances of internet access disruption were taken in Jammu and Kashmir in 2023, including 16 consecutive orders for three-day closures in January and February 2024. There were four in each of Haryana and Jharkhand, seven in West Bengal, and numerous shutdowns in Rajasthan. The recent longest shutdown apart from J&K is in the northeastern state of Manipur, which lasted for 143 days, the longest ever. The 2.2

million residents of Manipur, India, have been affected by the prolonged internet outage for more than a hundred days (Rajvanshi, 2023). Commencing on May 3, 2023, this closure was put in place to suppress rumors and misinformation amid violent conflicts between the Kuki-Zo and Meitei ethnic tribes (Sitlhou, 2023).

This paper explores the consequences of the internet shutdown on the global and national levels while looking into the regional regions, how their livelihoods have been severely affected by the shutdown, and what other challenges have arisen in the name of preserving peace. While proponents of digital rights contend that cutting off one's internet usage has made no one safer, in fact, information sharing has been severely hampered by the internet ban, and for many, it was the essential social and economic lifeline that links the nation's farthest rural areas. These Internet shutdowns were hampering the basic liberty of Indian citizens, snatching their constitutional right, 'Article 19' Right to Freedom and Expression, and putting a question mark on the country that is being portrayed as a role model of democracy. This paper highlights the negative consequences of the disruption effect of the internet, which is becoming more frequent and taking us a way back to where we were planning for digital India. This study tends to highlight the impact of prolonged Internet shutdowns on civil liberties and socio-economic development in states amidst ethno-political conflicts.

In this study, the present section has introduced the supreme importance of the internet in today's era and how its intentional disruption is hampering people's daily lives and darkening digital democracy. The second section briefly looks at how the internet is blurring lines between the northeast and other regions of India, focusing more on an inclusive and unified approach. The third section investigates cases in which the internet could be a tool for mass revolution and highlights the regional problem on a massive level. The next section outlines

Manipur as a state ethnic tribe and culture and discusses the ethnopolitical conflict and the cause of the internet shutdown. The fifth section outlines the diverse categories of arguments, shutdown repercussions, and suffering residents while shedding light on Manipur's socio-economic loss and other legal constitutional infringement issues related to the violations occurring on the internet. Finally, the conclusion succinctly summarizes the primary findings outlined in the paper.
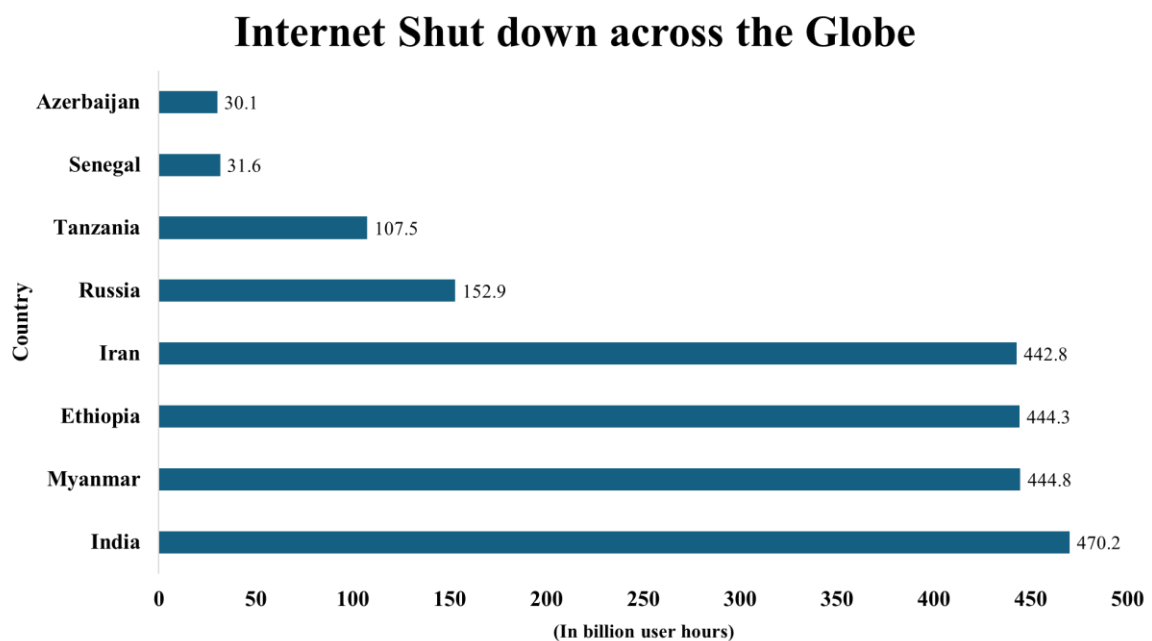
Internet Shut down across the Globe

Figure 1. Worldwide Internet Shutdown data (Number of hours of blocks/shutdowns times the users affected)

Source: (Statista, 2024)

Internet and North East India: The Role of Social Media in the Mass Revolution

When compared to other regions of the nation, social media usage in northeast India offers intriguing geographical diversity. The various studies show that, compared to the southern, western, and northern parts of India, the northeastern states—Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West

Bengal, Assam, and the rest of the northeast—have lower levels of new media exposure and usage (*Social Media*, 2019). The current new media can be a successful instrument for development communication in the Northeast, but its widespread use has been hampered by issues including poor connectivity, remoteness, and slower economic growth (Roy, 2015). Northeast India as it stands today has an international boundary of about 90% and is linked with the rest of the nation only through a chicken's neck, consisting of a narrow land of 20 km stretch in north Bengal. The region has a combined population of about four crores (Census of India, 2011), and approximately 64.2 percent of its total area is under forest cover, rich in biodiversity and timber, making it India's greenest state (Warjri, 2015).

A substantial part of these forest areas falls under what is known as community forests, and some fall under the jurisdiction of the Independent Councils under the 6th Schedule. The region is quickly becoming a hub for the extractive industry. As a result, the region's ecology and environment are being negatively impacted. People are now more connected to one another, thanks to technological advancements brought about by globalization. Not only does technology close the distances while simultaneously drawing people and societies closer, but there is also a wealth of indications demonstrating how the digital world can foster dissent and a variety of stories, from organizing and spreading entire political movements to providing spaces for the marginalized (Brown et al., 2023).

To exchange ideas and discuss subjects from a particular perspective, members of the Dalit community in India, for example, have established specialized websites, online forums, and social media platforms. Thanks to these digital venues, members of once marginalized populations can now actively contribute to the formation of a distinct national consciousness (Bharti, 2024). In the same spirit, social networking was essential in facilitating the sharing of assault experiences during India's #MeToo campaign. Social media has the potential to transform a basic argument into a protest when organized strategically and methodically. The

theory of media conspiracy asserts that it is highly probable that radical ideologies will manifest, proliferate, and develop within the contemporary information landscape, sometimes inciting collective and individual extremists to perpetrate unlawful or aggressive behaviours (*How It Spreads*, 2016). To fight against the discrimination led by mainland people during the coronavirus, a small northeastern number of users launched an online campaign to raise awareness and spark protests on social media platforms by utilizing various graphic and metadata tag techniques. These kinds of campaigns served as a call to action for political action from individuals in positions of authority.

On Facebook and Twitter, hashtags like #IamIndian, #IamNotCoronavirus, and #NoToDiscriminationAgainstNortheastIndians were launched, along with a Facebook profile frame bearing these phrases (Haokip, 2020). During the pandemic, a lot of Facebook sites actively participated in the battle against racism by posting recordings of these kinds of situations. The pages participated in a critical evaluation of the methods by which the "Janata Curfew," along with the lighting of diyas and candles at "9 pm, 9 minutes," were commemorated, accompanied by pertinent hashtags. They narrated the events through text and the distribution of video content. The majority of these films have received thousands of shares. The hashtags #StopRacism, #StopAbuse, #NorthEastIndia, and #SocialStigma were often used. Due to the lockdown, internet activism is now the sole way to both protest and communicate with individuals in positions of authority. During the shutdown, the internet— especially social media—was the only efficient way to exert pressure on the administration. Research also brought attention to the dangers and influence of social networking sites in the northeast, especially following the August 2012 evacuation event. A large-scale migration of northeast Indians from southern cities was brought on by hate speech and threats disseminated over social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. This incident served as a reminder of how

social media is changing, how people connect and communicate, as well as the importance of strong governance and strong leadership in handling problems brought on by social media dynamics (Magnier, 2012; Neog, 2021).

Social media distrust

Nevertheless, it is imperative to recognize the escalating importance of social networking site platforms in facilitating social communication. The response through social networking sites has notably transformed the scenario of public-societal interaction. Apart from their utilization by the general public, these platforms are also harnessed by prominent personalities in various fields such as politics, business, and academia for the dissemination of ideas and knowledge, as well as for gaining insights into public opinions (Bunker et al., 2019). Convergence behavior is the phenomenon of assets, people, resources, and now information spontaneously moving in large numbers toward the event region during large-scale events such as protests or catastrophes (Mirbabaie et al., 2019). As a result of their design and nature—that is, system personalization—social media platforms have enabled communication, collaboration, and coordination on an unprecedented scale, which has greatly benefited society and individuals.

However, they have enabled the spread of antisocial, narcissistic, and egocentric tendencies, which have resulted in actions like passing on misinformation or manipulating images and spreading rumors—including one's identity theft—cyberbullying, discrimination, threats, invasions of privacy, and other associated activities (Bunker et al., 2019). We argue that these three unforeseen implications of modern social media platforms pose a serious challenge to crisis management practitioners and the general public in building trust with this internet community as an efficient medium for communication and information sharing that advances ICT innovations for the benefit of society as a whole.

Australians polled by Roy Morgan Research (Morgan, 2018) revealed that 47% of them mistrusted the information they obtained on social networking sites. Their responses included: i) false statistics and audience measurement; ii) personal information that was stolen and disseminated; iii) fake news and truth manipulation; Without supporting data, statements can be made by anyone, and news is sensationalized and turned into entertainment. Unforeseen repercussions of the emergence of uncontrolled and open communication on social media platforms are becoming harder to overcome. The shutdowns are majorly advantageous for fostering a harmonious society by curbing hate speech and disinformation that has the potential to provoke violence, consequently leading to public disorder and jeopardizing security. They play a role in safeguarding national security and sovereignty against external risks and cyber threats, as well as in managing the dissemination and reception of content that may pose harm or offense to specific communities or individuals. This aligns with the concept of conspiracy theory, which pertains to an elucidation of past, present, or forthcoming occurrences that attributes a primary causative element to a faction of influential individuals, known as the conspirators, who operate covertly for their gain in opposition to the collective welfare (Uscinski, 2018).

Manipur, the state of ethnic tribe and culture

Northeastern India's Manipur state is abundant in forests, minerals, and other natural resources. However, because of its remote location, poor infrastructure, fierce opposition from the people's action, and limited legal safeguarding of the land provided by its autonomous district councils, these resources have largely been ignored by the corporate houses and other renowned bodies (*Article 371C: Special Provision*, 2023).

Manipur, which translates to "Land of Jewels," is made up of mountain ranges encircling a valley. It's home to predominantly thirty-nine ethnic communities that practice various religions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, besides indigenous religious practices like Sanamahi. The foundation for initial opposition and separatist movements was established through protests against the 1949 incorporation of Manipur into India, which was the focal point of conflict between the capital and other regions of the northeastern part of India (Nepram & Schuchert, 2023). Several ethnic groups coexist in the state of Manipur. The Nagas (24%), Kuki-Chin (16%), and Meitei (53%) are the major groups distributed in four categories: general, five lower castes, tribal groups (ST), and other backward classes (OBC). Their largest ethnic group, the Meitei's, makes up the majority of the general category. In compliance with Article 342, the President of India designates the ethnic group or tribal community that will be classified as ST after consulting with the relevant state governor, according to the Indian Constitution. As per the 2001 census, the communities of Kukis and Nagas belong to the minority ST group and collectively make up around 34.2% of Manipur's population (Kipgen, 2013). In terms of identity-building patterns, certain ethnic dispute theories contend that individuals who are related to one another in terms of blood in one's civilization or dialect have a propensity to either reduce or increase conflicts amid various ethnic groupings. Larger than those from other ethnic groups, people can influence or persuade members of their ethnic group (Blimes, 2006). The Indian constitution currently recognizes the Nagas and Kukis as "scheduled tribes," acknowledging their lower socioeconomic status. But then, the Meitei aren't (*Understanding the Complex Conflict*, 2023). The Meitei's, who make up the majority of Hindus in valley areas, were to be granted scheduled tribe status, but the two largest, mostly Christian tribes in the state's hill districts were against the ruling. With that categorization, land in the hills designated by the Indian Constitution for scheduled tribe communities may be

purchased by the politically powerful Meitei, who comprise approximately fifty percent of the people in the state.

The ethno-political clashes and conflicts

Thus, since May 2023, violent conflicts have erupted in the state of Manipur once more, which is sensitive to ethnic differences either on purpose or accidentally. When individuals who live adjacent to one another are free to follow their interests, conflicts of interest frequently arise, but they neglect to acknowledge and honor other people's perspectives. Violence may arise from disputes that arise between several ethnic groupings or even individuals within the same group. However, it becomes evident that not all ethnic tensions result in violence (Kipgen, 2013). The internet ban in the state, where the administration cut down internet connectivity for the most part when violence emerged after a gathering by Kuki-Zo and Naga tribal groups. The dispute is multifaceted and involves numerous stages with competing interests. These include a) the long-standing dispute on land ownership and indigenous rights; b) the government's divide-and-conquer strategy to stifle the independence movement of the people; c) financial gains from the illegal drug trade; and finally, d) the possibility of the administration and authority of corporate entities profiting resources from the nature of this isolated region (*Understanding the Complex Conflict*, 2023).

The conflicts have resulted in well over 100 deaths and almost 75,000 displaced people, and the prolonged shutdown of the internet, which has been in place for over two months since fighting erupted between the two tribes in the state in the early days of May 2023, was partially

lifted by the Manipur High Court later. The Internet shutdown in Manipur, as per some experts' claims, encourages rather than stops the spread of false information. Furthermore, according to recent reports, social media has turned into a battlefield in Manipur's conflict-ridden region, where various communities use it to exchange information, tell their stories, and fight one another online. The dissemination of rumors, insufficient information, and hate speech on interactive media platforms like Facebook and Instagram is indicative of the intricate dynamics of ethnic conflicts that are taking place in the region's digital space (Chakrabarti, 2023).

Even though the Internet shutdown has been lifted overall, there are still restrictions in some conflicting regions. There was also a suspension of operations for mobile towers that offer assistance within a two-kilometer area aligned with the border between districts, such as Chandel, Kakching, Churachandpur, Bishnupur, Kakching, Kangpokpi, Imphal West, and East, among many others. The ban on mobile towers serving particular conflict areas is scheduled to last until December 18, 2023 (*Manipur Violenc*, 2023).

Shutdown repercussions

In the mid-June report, HRW and the Internet Freedom Foundation declared that India had "closed down internet access more than any other country." They discovered that between January 2020 and December 2022, access was restricted 127 times by Indian authorities, mostly in response to or an attempt to stop rallies but also for less serious issues like stopping exam cheating. Such shutdowns, according to Indian officials, are necessary to stop rumors from inciting violence and to stop crowds from organizing (Bapat; & Singh, 2023). However, the watchdogs contend that the actions jeopardize citizens' rights to employment and government services and go against India's efforts to develop a digital economy (Sitlhou, 2023). Although the situation in Manipur is serious, the internet shutdown is not a unique incident. Mishi Choudhary, the US-based Indian technical lawyer, claims that "the Manipur blockade

devastated the capacity for information to disseminate globally." She formed the Software Freedom Law Center, or SFLC.in, in her own country to defend digital liberties (Rajvanshi, 2023).

The state's five-month internet ban will end, as stated by Manipur's Chief Minister, N. Biren Singh. On May 3, the government of Manipur implemented an internet shutdown to combat misinformation and stop violent ethnic confrontations. Two indigenous women were attacked by a group of guys the next day, who first paraded them in their undies before gang-raping one of them. It wasn't until July 20th that this unsettling episode gained widespread attention, thanks to a viral video that showed this horrible deed. The offenders weren't taken into custody until 77 days after the crime was committed (Pradyut & Atribh, 2023). The Manipur internet shutdown, which lasted for 142 days, demonstrates how ingrained the internet has grown in our lives and how closely it is connected to both Article 19(1)(a) 'Freedom of Speech and Expression' right and Article 21 'Protection of Life and Personal Liberty'. Lack of internet connection has an impact on our communication, education system, economy, and way of life. The inability to register for tests, pay rent, access online educational materials, or even perform one's job are all consequences of this lack of access. Though Manipur's violence is among the worst the state has seen in centuries, it is not unheard of in northeast India, a region where the individualities of numerous indigenous tribes are often exploited for the advantage of dominant groups. Due to the lack of initiatives aimed at fostering mutual understanding among diverse communities regarding their respective historical narratives, cultural practices, and customs, persistent efforts in peacebuilding over an extended period will need to address the historical exploitation of colonial divisions.

Suffering residents

The complete shutdown of the internet has only negative consequences for the residents. The isolation has hampered them mentally amidst the ethno-political conflict in the state. *The disruption of internet services has had a detrimental impact on our psychological well-being, surpassing even the challenges posed by the pandemic. Amid COVID-19, I could still benefit from the online learning opportunities and the vast information resources available there. However, in the current scenario, I am devoid of such options, as the ongoing conflict has exacerbated our distress, rendering us unable to pursue higher education. This has left us feeling disheartened and apprehensive about the prospect of another academic year being wasted again by a research scholar from Manipur studying at Mizoram University.*

The cutting off of the internet leads to a dearth of transparency and information, which can also trigger frenzy and terror. It may also make it more difficult for the media, human rights advocates, and civil society organizations to keep an eye on and report on the situation on the ground. Instead, careful use of the internet could have readily produced avenues for the dissemination of information that helped dispel doubts and clarify the air. *Along with the internet, there was the dysfunctionality of the telephone network. Our family members are located in the area of conflict. The absence of the internet and the inability to make phone calls induced a sense of apprehension and distress in us, hindering our ability to ascertain their well-being, whether they are alive or not.*

The Internet is perceived as a crucial element in cultivating an enlightened society, according to the information society theory which suggests that modern societies are characterized by having informed, educated, and attentive individuals who can retrieve, disseminate, and generate information (Webster, 2020). The right to use the Internet allows all individuals to express and fulfill all other basic human rights, such as the freedom to express oneself, to assemble and form associations, to live, to practice one's religion, and to acquire information,

among others. For this reason, the main effects of internet outages are on people's autonomy of expression as well as information accessibility. These freedoms are fundamental to the entire process of personality development and are the basis of democratic and free societies (Bharti, 2024). Even those isolated homes that depended on the internet to be connected for everyday necessities appear to have lost their bearings. The administration always hides behind the pretense that imposing the military and taking down the internet will restore order to a region plagued by violence. *Amidst the prevailing uncertainty regarding the resolution of conflicts and the appalling mistreatment of two Kuki women who were publicly exposed, my family decided to relocate my sister to a secure location closer to my educational institution in Mizoram. Unfortunately, due to the unavailability of internet access, we were unable to procure tickets in advance, resulting in our reliance on local modes of transportation such as buses and sumos. This arduous journey subjected us to significant hardships, as we encountered disrespectful behavior from individuals who treated us with great cruelty. Consequently, we were compelled to conceal our identities and shield our faces throughout the journey.*

Manipur's socio-economic loss

There have been substantial socio-economic repercussions for the region from Manipur's prolonged internet outage. It has affected communication, healthcare, and education, disrupting and costing corporations, individuals, and students alike. Estimates indicate that the disruption of internet services cost the Indian economy some $2.8 billion. Leading to a drastic impact on the economy. Concerning the shutdown orders' effects on human rights and socioeconomic development have also been raised by the lack of accountability and transparency in their execution (Chakraborty, 2023). A student-run non-profit organization called MitSna, with its

headquarters in Imphal, the state's main city, wrote an open letter to Manipur Chief Minister Biren Singh on May 17th, stating that the state's Internet ban had caused an "alarming" issue for the state's youth. The JEE, which is the collaborative entrance examination for gaining admission to graduation courses and schemes in engineering at the National Institute of Technology and the Indian Institute of Information Technology (IIIT), and other various mechanical institutions supported by the central government, in addition to establishments and universities endorsed or recognized by collaborating state governments, were part of the entrance examinations that students failed to meet the registration deadlines for. "These missed opportunities might pose challenges for them in the pursuit of postgraduate studies and other forms of advanced education" (Iyer, 2023). Random internet shutdowns disproportionately harm underprivileged communities that rely on social safety nets from governments to buy food and make a living, as per the New Delhi-based Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF). Ironically, administrations have never taken the time to evaluate the financial loss, much less the disastrous effect. Due to more than 16,000 hours of nationwide internet outages over the past three years, industry insiders have conservatively estimated that they have lost close to Rs 40,000 crore. However, the influence is widespread, goes well beyond the field of economics, and may even have an impact on routine, everyday tasks. While the loss of revenue is evident, official reports make no mention of the catastrophic effects on information, entertainment, health, education, or other areas of daily life. While the Union government has been bragging about how it has transformed India into a major digital center, it also employs internet suspension as a quick fix for violent crime (Brittas, 2023).

The healthcare services in the area have also been impacted by Manipur's internet outage. For instance, for months, Dr. Ngaijavung, a radiologist in the Churachandpur area, was compelled to manually mail radiology reports, which inconvenienced patients and interfered with the

provision of healthcare services. Similarly, during the unrest, medical college students discovered that they were in "no-internet zones" when their online lessons resumed, which had an impact on their education and academic achievement. Businesses have also been significantly impacted by the shutdown, especially those that depend on internet operations and services. John Henkam, a Lamka local who owns a cosmetics store, for example, was forced to switch to cash transactions because digital payments were entirely suspended during the closure. Communication has also been hampered by the lack of internet connectivity, making it difficult for people and companies to obtain news and information throughout the unrest (Chakraborty, 2023). The state's socioeconomic circumstances have gotten worse, and as a result, all economic activity has stopped completely. Even the prior shutdown of the internet shows drastic consequences for the economy. In the year 2019, the communication blockade endured for a period of six months in the region of Kashmir, resulting in the unemployment of over five hundred thousand individuals. The prolonged cessation of internet services led to notable disturbances for indigenous businesses and the economic operations within the state. Even in 2021, shutdowns that lasted more than a month in Rajasthan caused losses of Rs 800 crore. This demonstrates the direct and substantial financial impact that even brief internet outages may have on the regional economy. Nationwide internet outages in 2022 resulted in losses to the economy exceeding Rs 1,500 crore. The cumulative effect of several shutdowns that were implemented during that time in various parts of the nation is depicted in this figure. Internet outages have already cost an estimated Rs 2,091 crore in the first half of 2023 alone. This suggests that the financial effects of internet outages across the nation are getting worse. According to the report, while Internet access can empower marginalized communities by providing them with knowledge and information, frequent outages make it more difficult for these communities to overcome obstacles to healthcare, education, employment, and other opportunities (Iyer, 2023).

Constitutional infringement and negative national implications

The internet shutdown has drawn a lot of criticism for being overly severe, infringing on people's right to free speech, and invading their daily lives, particularly if it is taken to quell dissent. The implementation of these shutdowns has been given a great deal of leeway because phrases like "public safety" and "public emergency" lack precise legal definitions and legislation. It has violated the basic rights of the Constitution of India in Article 19(1)(a), 'freedom of speech and expression', Article 19(1)(g), and Article 21, considering its significance, the right to uninterrupted internet access is an expansion of the basic right to life (Mathur & Varma, 2019). Therefore, it would be a blatant violation of Article 21 of the Constitution to cease offering internet services. According to Indian law, these shutdowns should therefore only be used in rare circumstances. In the 21st century, since expression through the internet has gained contemporary relevance, the Internet has become one of the major means of information diffusion. The Supreme Court declared that the freedom of the 'print medium' is covered under the freedom of speech and expression. It has also snatched journalists away from writing and publishing news stories, creating an information gap (Maheshwar, 2023). According to the UN Report, 2022, turning down the Internet has immeasurable negative effects on both material and human rights issues. Every year, internet access is suspended in a few different regions of the nation. There have been about thirty of these cases so far in the year 2023 alone, with Manipur being the most recent (Brittas, 2023). The devastating effects of internet outages, which the people in conflict-torn Manipur have experienced as a second tragedy, were made evident during a recent visit. The entire population has been negatively affected by the internet vacuum, both in plains and hills.

Degrading Indian Democracy and Uprising Global Challenges

India boasts over 800 million people using the internet, making it the nation with the second-highest digital population globally, after China. According to the article "(*No Internet*, 2023)," India has seen more internet shutdowns than any other nation since 2018. As stated in the report on global digital rights by '(*Internet Shutdowns#KeepItOn Report*, 2023)', India was accountable for 84 out of 187 shutdowns worldwide in 2022. It was based on fieldwork and interviews with over fifty people who had been impacted by shutdowns in many Indian states, such as Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan, Haryana, Jharkhand, and some of the northeastern states. It also included accounts from legislators, attorneys, activists, and journalists on their experiences. Despite India's commitment to protect digital liberties, which was expressed in a June 2022 G7 statement guaranteeing "an internet that is reliable, secure, global, free, and interoperable," shutdowns have increased in frequency and duration, according to the report. Numerous significant rulings have been rendered, including the 2020 decision by the highest judiciary body in Anuradha Bhasin vs. Union of India, which highlighted the critical role that cyberspace plays in various aspects of life and work. However, despite the Committee on Communications and Information Technology by Parliament having given unanimous recommendations, certain governments have been enforcing internet shutdowns with brief consideration for them. The digital divide between those who have access to dependable and reasonably priced internet and those who do not is further widened by internet shutdowns. They disproportionately affect marginalized groups, including low-income households, women, minorities, rural populations, and individuals with impairments. Additionally, they run counter to the government's vision of a "Digital India," which seeks to empower people by utilizing digital public services and infrastructure.

Conclusion

The study has highlighted the major consequences of prolonged Internet shutdowns on the civil liberties of individuals and shows the devasting economic conditions of the nation and the Manipur region, including a plethora of adverse outcomes. The ramifications of such actions extend to the socio-economic sphere, leading to a decline in living standards for millions, disruptions in essential facilities like health maintenance and education, and a sense of isolation from the larger national community, ultimately contributing to a deterioration in mental well-being among affected populations. The toll exacted by internet shutdowns on individuals surpasses that of even a pandemic. The shutdown has put constraints on the dissemination of news within a specific region, including the infringement upon individuals' rights to civil liberty of free speech and expression, and has put measurable restrictions on journalistic writing and publishing, creating a huge information gap across the region and nation, putting a limit on the inside deeds of Manipur from getting widespread. The video of sexually assaulted women went viral after a month of FIRs were filed, which could possibly have caused a sensation on the internet and nationwide online protests against the accused (Bhasin, 2023). However, the Internet shutdown has proven to be a loophole in Indian democracy, degrading the national identity of being a role model of a democratic nation where global awareness of the transpiring events is impeded. In the era of digital India and advanced technology, internet disruptions pose a significant setback for developing and emerging nations such as India. A considerable portion of the population relies on the Internet for essential livelihood activities, while the government increasingly integrates digital technologies and internet-based services. Consequently, an internet shutdown resembles rendering individuals incapacitated, an urgent matter that demands attention.

The government must furnish valid justifications for the disruption of internet services, given that indiscriminate shutdowns incur substantial social and economic repercussions while frequently proving to be ineffectual. Furthermore, the administration has not shown how the

current localized law and order problems may be resolved by a state-wide internet shutdown and should come with less restrictive measures like targeted shutdowns at the district level or blocking specific social media platforms or websites that could be more appropriate and acceptable. The government should explore more focused and reasonable strategies that strike a balance between security considerations and increase community participation and communication with more comprehensive crisis management strategies, such as inclusive discussion to bridge the trust gap between the Kuki and Meitei people and to take specific political and developmental actions while simultaneously enhancing the hilly region.

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