

EMERGING CHALLENGES OF INTERNET GOVERNANCE IN NORTH EAST INDIA

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Another criticism of IGF has been that it lacks meaningful participation from its many stakeholders. As such, regional and national

fora for discussion on policy issues related to the internet can help streamline an agenda towards action on context-specific issues. In 2021, Indian government launched the nation-specific chapter of IGF, the India Internet Governance Forum (IIGF) to attend to the nation's E-Governance and National Security issues, among other aspects.

As a field of study, internet governance borrows significantly from the field of international relations and politics. Early studies have also focused exclusively on perspectives from science and technology studies. As the world moves towards AI, ML; as also the recognition of the need to provide access to ICT for meaningful usage, there is a need to study internet governance from a sociological perspective. And as internet is a global phenomena with local presence and experiences, the India's North East India Region is not isolated from its impact, experiences, challenges and mitigations.

Infrastructure and the Internet

The North East Indian states constitute 7.9% of India's geographical area; and as per the last census of 2011, are 3.8% of the population. The formation of East Bengal and Burma at the time of independence from the United Kingdom is recognised as a rather tangible break in the once better networked economic geography of the region leaving aside the 27-km-wide Siliguri Corridor as the only link to the rest of India. The region was left largely isolated from the development paradigm until the 1990s when economic reforms were introduced (Ziipao, 2020, p 14). Raile Rocky Ziipao

foregrounds the fact that all benefits of development have been concentrated in the urban centres of North East India while the externalities of development had been disproportionately faced by the tribal territories. Depending on calculations of national security, viability as a resource frontier, challenges posed by the geographical terrain, or due to the fate of centrality of location vast sections of the North Eastern region still remain outside of infrastructure and connectivity considerations and by extension lagging in several development indicators. (Ziipao, 2020, p 17)

Connectivity & Meaningful Access Last Mile is an Internet Conundrum

Depending on one's location, socioeconomic and geographical, the role of the internet in everyday life is becoming increasingly less optional to the point that certain nations have entered the 'era of compulsory computing' with the United Kingdom putting in place a list of essential skills an adult need in a digital world. (Allmann & Blank, 2021) Closer home, the *Digital India* programme is inching towards the inadvertent effect of making reliance on digital technologies compulsory. Banking, education and job applications, access to government services and schemes are only some of the tasks where online mode of access has come to be made preferable, where not made wholly inaccessible offline. As such, internet connectivity is emerging as a new infrastructure which is constantly evolving in its nature and scope.

In terms of internet access in the North Eastern Region, internet penetration and tele density of the region has been low with Assam (28.2%), Meghalaya (34.7%), Tripura (22.9%) being among states and union territories with less than 40% women using the internet, per NFHS 5 (2019-20). This has been sought to remedy by interventions like the 'Comprehensive Telecom Development Plan' for the North-Eastern Region. (No takers for NE Telecom Development plan, 2016) However, the mere presence of the internet does not guarantee the visibility of people to the data processes or their ability to access and configure data to create instead of being relegated to being passive consumers and subjects of data processes (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2021).

There is a need to move away from thinking about the relationship of marginalised communities with the internet only in terms of the digital divide, and access to the internet and ICT. The new pressures of meaningfully using and navigating the digital space need to be accommodated by emphasising on the need to acquire capabilities to distinguish the usefulness and source of an information, and to contribute information. Discrepancies in capabilities of the user and configuration of the digital media can keep one from being able to fully utilise the internet to better their list of choices and alternatives to lead their lives (Mansell, 2002). The use of complicated

electronic contracts, language barrier are some examples of such a discrepancy. When such a discrepancy arises, often the tendency is to render the people who are not easily accommodated in the set of parameters, fields, or with possession of documents in the right configuration mandatory for availing government services to be left disenfranchised from the new systems of welfare. There is much scope to deliberate upon ways to make the internet and digitally mediated spaces more inclusive in the region.

Issues around Internet Mediated Spaces in Northeast India

ICT-enabled scams and online fraud

With the increase in internet and ICT usage in the country, crimes have moved to yet another domain of cyber crimes. A survey by TrustCheckr, a data analytics startup found that at 41%, highest UPI scams are experienced in eastern states with every North Eastern state of India on the list. (41% Digital Frauds accounted in Eastern Region of India, 2021). The categories of online fraud were found to be KYC, fake cash-back, frauds through digital wallets, fake-selling, QR codes, UPI phishing, lottery scams, and financial frauds on social media. Cyber-enabled scams and fraud are evolving at a rate where even otherwise technologically equipped and skilled individuals have found it difficult to evade.

In September 2022, based on information received from Crime Against Children (CAC) unit of INTERPOL, Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) conducted raids in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura in connection with cases of downloading and transmission of CSAM (Child Sexual Abuse Material). (Assam and Arunachal Pradesh under CBI's Megh Chakra operation, 2022) The North East India states differ greatly in terms of cybercrimes reported from the region with Assam accounting for close to 5,000 cases of all cybercrimes and followed by Meghalaya at 107 cases as reported in the last NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) records (Crime in India 2021 NCRB, 2022).

State	Number of reported cybercrimes in 2021
Arunachal Pradesh	47
Assam	4846
Manipur	67
Meghalaya	107
Mizoram	30

Nagaland	8
Sikkim	0
Tripura	24

Source: NCRB

Internet shutdown

Internet shutdowns are worryingly becoming a common fixture in modes of governance in the North Eastern states of India. Most recently the state of Meghalaya faced internet shutdowns affecting 7 days in an effort to contain public discontentment and onslaught brought about by a border dispute at the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands. However, despite the internet shutdown, violence broke out days later drawing attention to the ineffectiveness and performative nature of internet shutdowns employed as a preventive technical measure for primarily social issues. Further, there are tangible losses to internet shutdowns with economic losses being the most convincing argument for various sections of the society.

State	Number of days affected by internet shutdown in 2022 ¹
Arunachal Pradesh	3
Assam	2
Manipur	5
Meghalaya	7
Mizoram	0
Nagaland	0
Sikkim	0
Tripura	0

Source: Numbers aggregated from news reports.

Tech employable workforce and lack of avenues

In 2020, a survey by BridgeLabz, an IP-driven incubation lab yielded that Nagaland (122%), and Meghalaya (112%) are amongst the top 15 states (out of total 32 states and UTs) where talent has performed above average in tech-employability. (Nagaland beats Karnataka in terms of job readiness; Karnataka ranks below average 2020) There is also recognition that the North Eastern states have a sizeable population employable by the ITES (Information Technology Enabled Services) industry such as in BPO services. However, the efforts to harness the demographic dividend in either of IT and ITES sector in the northeast has been lagging, with steady migration of the youth to the other regions of India in search of better avenues in these sectors.

Need for e-waste management

The eight states of North East India are served by the single authorised recycler plant maintained by the organisation United Global Trust in Guwahati. There are several e-waste collection centres across the states operated by diligent individuals and private entities (Bharadwaj 2021). However, without adequate sensitisation on the hazards of inadequately disposing e-waste along with other waste the problem of soil and water contamination due to the heavy metals leaching into the food chain remains a looming issue in the North East. There is sizeable production of e-waste in the North Eastern states and Guwahati, Assam figures in India's list of top 10 highest e-waste generators. A sizeable amount of e-waste is also processed by the informal sector where there is scant scope of gauging the safety measures undertaken by the workers and of safeguarding their rights (Wankhede 2020).

Online Gaming regulation

In the midst of opportunities for edutainment and entertainment, especially for the school going generation and beyond age groups, the looming threat of online games affecting psycho-social health of the users and the family hostile flareups are finding new stress points in the region, with increasing changing digital behaviour and adoptions, laced with digital consumerism. Not realising the irrelevance of governing this rising social and family destabiliser factor, the North Eastern states of Sikkim, Meghalaya, and Nagaland have come out with state regulations legalising gaming. Nagaland government has regulations dealing with games of skill, while Meghalaya and Sikkim have regulations pertaining to both games of chance and skill. In the time since regulating online gaming in 2021, Meghalaya is slated to house the nation's first Centre of Excellence in online gaming by March this year (Thathoo 2023).

Arrests based on social media posts

Several arrests of individuals, most notably from the states of Assam and Manipur, have been reported based on posts they made on social media. The arrests have invited questions of human rights and freedom of speech. The arrests have been short term in nature as they could not be rationalised on the face of civil society condemnation. (Manipur: Why arrest of Rights activist Mark Thangmang Haokip sparked unrest, 2022). However, there is a need for work proper legislation to ascertain proportionality of such posts warranting arrests to better safeguard the rights of individuals posting their opinions.