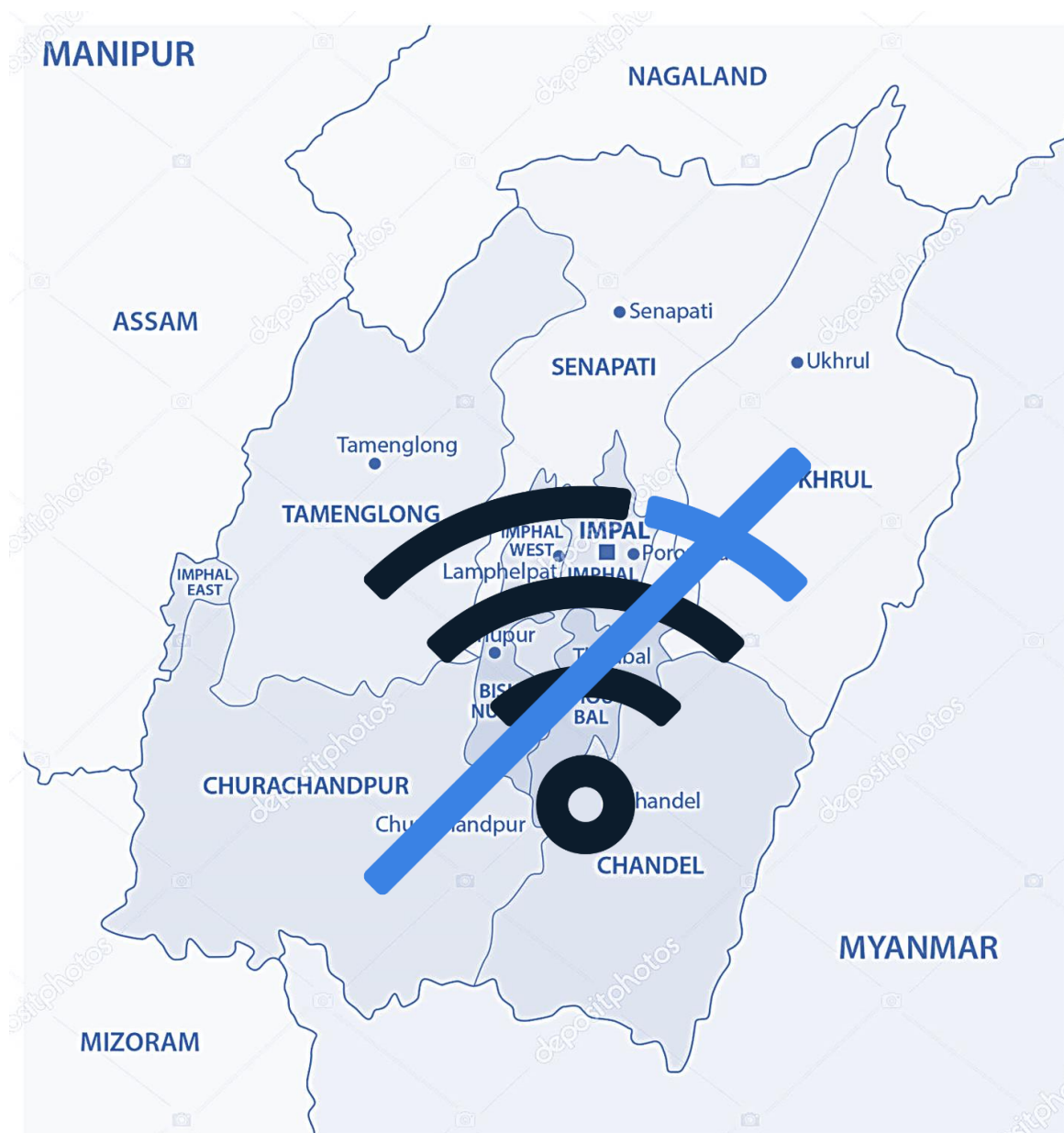


"Silent Networks: Assessing Social, Economic, and Psychological Threads of Extended Internet Shutdown in Manipur in North East India"



DECEMBER 2023

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Published by: Council for Social and Digital Development (CSDD) & North East Development Foundation (NEDF)

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Imphal| Guwahati



CONTENT

1. Introduction and Background	3
2. Interviewee Demographics	4
3. Social Impact	4
4. Economic Impact	5
5. Psychological Impact	5
6. Digital Impact	6
7. The Silent Network Narratives	7
8. Conclusion and Recommendations	14

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of the assessment was to understand the social, economic, psychological, and digital impacts of a prolonged internet shutdown resulting from ethnic violence between two tribes, Meitei and Kuki, in Manipur in the North East Himalayan Region of India, bordering Myanmar, during second half of 2023. This assessment aimed to gather firsthand insights from individuals affected by the shutdown to inform larger society, stakeholders, and humanitarian organizations about the consequences of such actions. By examining the experiences and perspectives of those directly impacted, the assessment sought to highlight the urgency of addressing the adverse effects of internet shutdowns on communities, promote dialogue for conflict resolution, and advocate for measures to prevent or mitigate future disruptions in similar contexts.

Interview Process: This interview-based assessment prioritised ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' autonomy and privacy. Interviews were conducted via phone, as video calls or online meetings was not possible due to the Internet Shutdown. Interviewers used a semi-structured approach, asking open-ended questions to encourage interviewees to share their experiences, perspectives, and insights. The interview format was flexible to explore various dimensions of the social, economic, psychological, and digital impacts of the internet shutdown.

Interviewers assured participants of confidentiality and anonymity, emphasizing that their responses would be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. Interview data were securely stored.

Before conducting interviews, interviewers obtained informed consent from participants, over the phone, explaining the purpose of the assessment, the voluntary nature of participation, and the rights of participants to withdraw from the call interview at any time.



2. INTERVIEWEE DEMOGRAPHICS

The individuals interviewed offer a diverse and representative snapshot of Manipur's populace, spanning various age brackets, educational backgrounds, and professional spheres. Ranging from students and professionals to entrepreneurs and farmers, these voices collectively provide a rich and nuanced perspective on the widespread implications of the prolonged internet shutdown for the people of Manipur.

3. SOCIAL IMPACT

"The disruption in education is palpable, with students grappling with significant challenges in accessing study materials and preparing for exams."

The social fabric of Manipur is undergoing a profound transformation due to the confluence of the internet shutdown and ethnic violence. The disruption in education is palpable, with students grappling with significant challenges in accessing study materials and preparing for exams. The imposition of exams without adjustments to the syllabus exacerbates existing disparities between valley-based and hill-based students, intensifying educational hardships. Instances of government overreach, such as arrests for online expression, contribute to a stifling atmosphere, fostering self-censorship and curtailing free speech.

Internal displacement adds another layer to the social complexities, particularly among children who find themselves in refugee camps with limited access to education. Families, both financially stronger and economically weaker, navigate the complexities of sending their children outside Manipur for schooling, adding an unexpected dimension to the socio-cultural dynamics of the region.

Social engagement and communications online reached a lowest ebb with digital representation and identify of the affected groups and people became meaningless suddenly. The faith and dependency on the power of Internet with lifesaving information and resources hit a new low with heightened uncertainty and mis-trust in Internet to drive their nascent and now hardest hit digital society and economy.

This man-made reverse Internet and digital divide due to result longest spell of Internet Shutdown since May 2023 onwards is seen as a gross violation of Internet and digital rights for the affected people in Manipur.

4. ECONOMIC IMPACT

"Farmers, particularly those involved in the production of seasonal fruits and vegetables, find themselves unable to reach markets due to disrupted supply chains."

The economic repercussions of the internet shutdown are far-reaching and touch various sectors. Entrepreneurs engaged in organic farming and tourism are grappling with substantial setbacks. The inability to predict internet availability makes long-term planning nearly impossible, dealing a severe blow to the prospects of scaling up tourism initiatives. Disruption in online presence and advertising further compounds challenges for businesses, hindering economic growth in a region that was already navigating a late entry into the digital economy paradigm.

Farmers, particularly those involved in the production of seasonal fruits and vegetables, find themselves unable to reach markets due to disrupted supply chains. This not only impacts personal finances but also has a cascading effect on the overall economy. The shutdown also hampers the formation of Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs), hindering crucial agricultural mobilization efforts. With the absence of online training opportunities, farmers in remote areas face challenges in adapting to modern agricultural practices, adding another layer to the economic ramifications.

5. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

"Students, facing heightened stress as they navigate exams without adequate preparation and resources, grapple with uncertainties about their academic future."

The extended internet shutdown takes a toll on the psychological well-being of Manipur's residents. Students, facing heightened stress as they navigate exams without adequate preparation and resources, grapple with uncertainties about their academic future. Professionals, who have lost jobs due to the situation, confront anxiety and apprehension about what lies ahead. The fear of repercussions for expressing opinions online contributes to a stifling atmosphere, fostering self-censorship and curtailing freedom of expression.

The internal displacement of families and the pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty further contribute to the psychological burden on individuals. The disruption in normalcy and the limitations on daily life activities create a sense of insecurity and apprehension among the populace. These psychological challenges require immediate attention and support from mental health professionals to help individuals cope with the stressors induced by the crisis.

6. DIGITAL IMPACT

"The restrictions on internet usage, especially concerning communal content, infringed on the freedom of expression, leading to self-censorship among residents."

The internet shutdown has severely hampered digital connectivity in Manipur, affecting various facets of daily life. The reliance on undertaking forms and ID card verifications to access the limited internet exacerbates barriers to information. The restrictions on internet usage, especially concerning communal content, infringe on the freedom of expression, leading to self-censorship among residents.

Online-based professions, such as designing online courses or working with international organizations, face significant challenges in sustaining their operations. The hindrance to digital payments, a prevalent mode of financial transactions, further adds to the economic woes of the population. The disruption in digital connectivity has hampered communication channels, hindering collaborative efforts and impeding progress in various sectors.



7. THE SILENT NETWORK NARRATIVES

C. A'pam

Date of interview: 18th August, 2023

Aged 32, A'pam was brought up in Imphal- even then a conflict zone, but never witnessed such large-scale civil strife that put a complete stop to all routine life for such a long stretch of time, with no end in sight. She has been working in a social innovation programme since the start of this year which allowed her to work from anywhere in India, and she had chosen her home state to work out of and had moved back to Manipur since January 2023. On insistence of her parents, by June she decided to move out of the state eventually in an attempt to focus on her work. Her colleagues and organisation despite being based out of India were a little out of sync with the lived reality of the people of Manipur at the time and expected that work deadlines are met.

A. Rozer

Date of interview: 19th August, 2023 [currently based out of Imphal, Manipur]

A PhD scholar in Manipur University, and working as a scientific technical officer in an Imphal-based hospital. Had moved to Imphal in 2019 after completing undergrad and postgraduate degree from University of Delhi.

"The internet shutdown has impacted me to a fairly large extent by hindering my access to research papers. Besides, I am obligated to send monthly and weekly reports to the ICMR headquarters regarding my project, which also took a hit. The initial 1 month was the most difficult with a near total shutdown. At times some offices were designated as internet access points for the public, but the speeds had been pathetic. In the next phase internet shutdown was lifted from the WIFI connections with a set of conditions. I subscribe to Airtel broadband WIFI, and activating my connection required me to sign an undertaking at the Airtel office declaring that I will not use the broadband connection to spread any form of content which can be deemed as communal. However, most people in Manipur access internet via mobile phones. Broadband WIFI permeation in Manipur is largely limited to Imphal area and maybe a few larger towns like Thoubal, Churachandpur, and Senapati.

Mawi (pronounced Moie)

Date of interview: 3rd August, 2023 [Currently based in: Lamka in Churachandpur district]

Presently working in a college in Lamka after her Political Science undergrad from University of Delhi, postgraduation from Hyderabad Central University.

"The internet shutdown has only been partially lifted but it takes a lot of *Big Brother vetting*, what with all the undertaking forms and ID cards/Aadhar verification involved! Any form of content which can be deemed communally sensitive can land one in trouble. I have not applied for this WIFI connection so I feel deprived of all the digital news that I could have kept up with. I subscribe to Jio telecom and in the earlier phase, there was total telecom outage on Jio networks for many days due to infrastructural damage. I was forced to procure an Airtel SIM; this caused a lot of extra expenditure. Common people like me also face a lot of trouble due to lack of digital payments. In Manipur most people have prepaid electricity connection, the lack of digital payments caused great inconveniences to the people with some households going for days without electricity connection.

I also run a side business of mini-ATM service for the people of my locality. I run a Common Service Centre (CSC), and this is entirely dependent on the internet. I can withdraw cash for them with their ATM card on being provided their Aadhar card. But now there is a cash shortage in my locality and the bank is shutdown. Internet shutdown has majorly disturbed the cash availability in Lamka.

The other problem is that vast sections of the student community have been left without resources to study due to the internet shutdown. Further, the Manipur University forced the students to sit for their odd-semester exams without any edits to the syllabus despite the circumstances no department had covered their complete syllabus at the time of the shutdown. The valley-based students definitely had a leg up in appearing for the exams while the hill-based students were left to grapple with a second setback while still reeling from the disruption caused by COVID-19 pandemic. Gradually, the class 12 students and the masters' students have started going back to school, but even for the teachers, we are limited by the lack of internet while preparing our class notes."

On being asked if anyone from her district has been able to join college again at Manipur University, Mawi responded that nobody has been able to go back to the valley. Meanwhile classes have resumed for most courses across the university as well as technical institutes in the state. Last week masters' students from the tribal community held a press conference to put forth their demands to seek transfer from Manipur University to be able to attend offline classes in their region.

To be sure, cases of government high-handedness had already begun to impose a sense of self-censorship among the community in the days leading up to the violence. H. Vaiphei, a 21-year-old undergraduate student from Churachandpur was arrested on April 30th by the police for sharing his opinions against the chief minister in a Facebook post. On May 4th, it was reported that Vaiphei succumbed to injuries inflicted by a mob attack while he was on his way from the court to jail. Compare this to the CM of

neighbouring State of Mizoram who said that he is open to criticism given his stature as the CM.

M. Molarhing

Date of interview: 3rd August, 2023 [Currently based in: Chandel district]

"In the months since the civil strife in Manipur broke out, its impact on the children has been very conspicuous. The prolonged shutdown has abruptly initiated the children into becoming conscious of the ethnic identity of the people around them. While schools have commenced in several parts of Manipur, the general atmosphere of uncertainty has ensured that there are many who are left out from the education system at this point in time. There are many children among the internally displaced in the refugee camps. Of the ones who are financially stronger, I know many people who have moved half their family to the neighbouring states so that their children may avail education. Most people who have the means have sent their children outside Manipur to pursue education. Meanwhile the economically weaker section in the state from either of the 3 ethnic groups is left with no other choice but to hope for things to return to normalcy.

Professionally, I am working with farmers producing seasonal fruits and vegetables. This year the pineapple harvest had been particularly good but much of the produce has not been able to reach the market. This is a huge blow to the economy and to the personal finances of the farmers. The shutdown has affected the entire people of Manipur. We are praying for normalcy to return. Coming to the point about internet, in the month of May-June, 2023, I went to Guwahati City with the express purpose of availing internet to submit my reports to the stakeholders across the government and funding agencies. We were slated to start a management course for the farmers and microentrepreneurs, but at this point we are facing security issues in establishing contact with the farmers. Banking sector in my district as with the capital are doing their level-best to function even in times of strife like this. If you had been following the news there are some districts and places which are the unfortunate conflict centres – those are the places which may be facing an acute cash shortage. "

N. Nonglen, 32.

Date of interview: 5th August, 2023

Nonglen was employed in a Dehradun (State of Uttarkhand in North of India) based non-profit working with farmers to help assist them in forming FPCs in Manipur. The non-profit had to let go of him due to the current situation in Manipur. The FPC mobilisation activities and registration processes have been hampered due to the internet shutdown. The farmers had been sharing their documents and had been attending video conferencing meets towards FPC formation before the shutdowns. He mentioned that while it may be possible to train Kangpokpi district farmers in offline

mode due to their close proximity, the farmers at Pherzawl are spaced far apart and the digital mode of training had been very helpful.

Elizabeth

Date of interview: 19th August, 2023 [Currently based at: undisclosed]

Works as an in-house talent acquisition for an INGO based in Kenya which is currently involved in the social development sector of Manipur. Her work is completely online based – they use an online application tracking system to hire candidates. The initial 2 months also had a curfew in effect in addition to internet shutdown, this meant that she had not been able to conduct her work at all. Even as the internet shutdown is eased partially, the candidates are often unable to submit their assignments and documents on time due to poor internet connectivity.

S. Choudhury

Date of interview: 18th August, 2023 [Currently based at: Mantripukhri, Imphal West]

Works as a distributor in the FMCG sector. Over the years digital payments had become the preferred mode of money transactions, but the internet shutdown since the past 3 and ½ months has made him rely on NEFT transactions which require him to visit a brick-and-mortar bank due to limited internet connectivity. In the past 1 year, platform economy had begun to take off in Manipur with online shopping like Amazon, Flipkart, Nykaa, etc. rapidly expanding their services to last mile consumers; and gig workers with food delivery, ride hailing apps, etc. operating out of Imphal. The internet shutdown has put a damper on the burgeoning digital economy of Manipur, already a late entrant in the development paradigm of the nation.

Minlien

Date of interview: 2nd August, 2023

Milien, armed with a Ph.D. in Journalism and Mass Communication from HCU, returned to his roots in Manipur with a fervent drive to make a transformative impact. Settling back in his homeland, he embarked on a remarkable journey, crafting an innovative online PGDM course for a budding institute in the process of establishing a physical presence. Negotiations with a reputable university in neighboring Meghalaya for collaborations were well underway, promising a bright future for the initiative. However, the civil unrest that beset Manipur dealt a severe blow to Milien's aspirations. The unsettling turmoil prompted an internet shutdown, forcing the suspension of his flagship online course indefinitely. Despite the setback, Milien's unwavering determination remains undeterred as he navigates the challenges, offering a testament to his resilience and commitment to advancing education despite the odds.

H. Kipgen

Date of interview: 12th July, 2023

A serial entrepreneur, with stakes in two valley-based franchisees, and a fully organic farm estate in his native place which offered sustainable farm to table experience to clients across the world. His advertisements and functioning of the estate suffered due to extended internet shutdown. The prospects of scaling up tourism to the hill's region in particular and in Manipur in general through his farm-to-table practice has been severely hit. "We tried to maintain internet presence for our project, but with the present situation in Manipur... Now we cannot think of moving ahead because we can't predict what is going to happen in a day's time or in a week's time. Even if the internet is available at some part of the day it is not reliable enough to plan anything for the long term. I have no plans of moving out, ever since starting with my farm house, I have had the chance to explore the ways in which we as Kuki people are so dependent on our lands."

Thenthang

Date of interview: 20th July, 2023 [Currently based in: Lamka, Churachandpur District, Manipur]

Thenthang, a 27-year-old reporter hailing from Lamka in Manipur's Churachandpur district, found his life taking an unexpected turn amidst the ethnic conflicts that engulfed his region. Devoted to his role with the hill-based local news channel, TC Network, Thenthang was accustomed to bridging information gaps and keeping his community informed. However, the prolonged internet shutdown that accompanied the ethnic tensions presented him with unprecedented challenges. Cut off from online resources and the ability to transmit news updates, his role as a reporter was thwarted. The blackout rendered him unable to access crucial information, engage with his audience, or fulfil his journalistic responsibilities. Thenthang's unwavering passion for journalism was tested, but even amid the adversity, he persisted, seeking alternative means to gather news and sustain a semblance of community communication. His personal narrative reflects the resilience of individuals like him who strive to uphold their duties even in the face of significant obstacles, emphasizing the vital role of connectivity in the modern information landscape.

T. Haokip (Lelen)

Date of Interview: 16/02/2024

At the time of the video call, Lelen had excused himself briefly from an ongoing conference under the Committee for Tribal Unity, Sadar Hills. Several apex tribal bodies such as Zillai (Vaiphei Students Association), Thadou Students Association, etc. had assembled for talks on tribal solidarity. Speaking of internet shutdowns, Lelen mentioned that the absolute internet shutdown effected on the people in the month

of May, at a time of such acute crisis, was unsettling. To address the pressing need for communication and updates in the absence of internet, as a civil society organisation, they had started a community newspaper starting from last week of May in the Kangpokpi district. The community newspaper service was functional till January, at which point internet services started resuming with greater dependability. The newspaper carried news updates on firing in the Kangpokpri district and the peripheral areas such as Island block, Phailengmol, Saikul Subdivision, Bungpi, etc. The community newspaper was also deployed by the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya to issue notifications.

On the contrary, Lelen said that the Imphal valley, resided by the dominant Meitei community, has had to face significantly lesser outages in terms of internet as well as electricity. Just a week prior, Lelen told us that the power supply to the Saikul area was disrupted by miscreants in the valley. The restoration of power required for the students' body members to pressurise the government by issuing a 24-hour ultimatum to the government. As an individual from the hills, Lelen feels that it is deplorable that their access to basic infrastructural needs is manipulated per the whims of those in the valley, the area which serves as the administrative centre.

On being asked about the estimated percentage of subscribers in Kangpokpi district using fixed line broadband internet connection, Lelen told us that the reach of broadband internet has been low in the region, with a maximum of 30% people subscribing to broadband internet. Most people have access to mobile internet. On being asked about the demand for interim arrangements of providing community internet connection he said that it might have some use.

K. Davidson Singh

Date: 16/02/2024

In the early days of the internet shutdown in the aftermath of the Manipur conflict which broke out in May 2023, there was a rush for fibre connections as the internet shutdown had largely clamped down on mobile internet connection. David, a Moirang-based activist and founder of a Society began by recounting the scramble that civil society, social development sector and humanitarian groups had gone through to function in the middle of an internet shutdown to conduct meetings and group calls which are otherwise conducted over online calls. The humanitarian groups in the state responded to the conflict by mobilising and ideating over phonecalls, SMS to plan their relief work and interventions on the ground. Now, 10 months into the conflict, David told us that it is crucial to study the psychosocial and other impacts of the internet ban and the accompanied atmosphere of surveillance on

activists, creatives, and frontliners who often use the medium to engage with their community.

Speaking about enhancing internet connectivity in the middle of the conflict, David told us that most people who found it feasible to procure a fibre connection had to get a connection but the buffer regions continue to be outside of connectivity considerations since the beginning of the onslaught. In most areas where an internet ban is imposed, the fibre connections continue to function while only affecting the mobile internet. Across fibre and mobile connectivity options, Airtel and Jio emerged as the only viable TSPs. Across Manipur many individuals have had to procure multiple SIM cards in the aftermath of the violence.

There has been a certain sense of normalisation of the internet shutdowns in the country whenever faced with a disturbance in the society. The Manipur government set up some version of free WIFI access for people at the relief camps. However, internet connections provided at a relief camp has limited use and functionality for many victims faced with catastrophic losses of property and life's savings.

The relief camps host anywhere between 200 to 1000 people in one facility. It is doubtful how far the government aided fibre based WIFI connectivity is meaningful for the people in terms of speed and usability.

Buffer zones have been left completely unconnected from the internet in the months since the start of the turmoil in May 2023. In contrast to urban areas of Manipur which have had fewer internet shutdowns than the rural areas and buffer zones, people in the buffer zones also have to travel greater distances to avail access to information, and health and emergency support. The people in buffer zones have to travel greater distances if they have to access internet from designated public internet access points such as educational institutes and hospitals. The people in buffer zones in a sense are having to undergo multiple layers of inaccessibility.

The cost of internet access relative to income is at an all-time high when most people are facing acute economic crisis. Additionally, people who have avoided fibre connections to this point in favour of mobile internet due to cost considerations are compelled to spend greater on internet access whether by way of securing fibre connections or multiple SIM cards to ensure network access.

The lack of internet connection compromises right to privacy. Several platforms for email and text messaging which are revered for the premium they place on an individual's right to privacy and employ better encryption methods become out of access for discerning individuals when access to internet is restricted. Regular phone calls, SMS, and popular email service providers like Gmail are easy to tap into.

There is a scope for opening a deeper conversation on surveillance and breach of privacy. There is a need for designing modules around awareness and access of safer

digital practices. There is an acute need for better awareness of digital security practices in Manipur. For many people now, some of the greater personal violence was possible due to the individual's digital privacy being compromised.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the assessment of the social, economic, psychological, and digital impacts of the prolonged internet shutdown in Manipur reveals a complex web of challenges facing the residents. To address these issues effectively, a comprehensive approach is necessary.

Recommendations:

- i. **Conflict Resolution and Dialogue:** Prioritize conflict resolution through inclusive dialogue between communities to foster understanding and reconciliation. The government and relevant stakeholders should actively engage in promoting peace and addressing underlying issues.
- ii. **Protecting Free Speech:** Safeguard the freedom of expression by challenging and reforming laws that stifle online expression. Ensuring that citizens can express their opinions without fear of repercussions is crucial for a healthy and open society.
- iii. **Investing in Digital Infrastructure:** Allocate resources to enhance digital infrastructure in Manipur to mitigate the impact of future disruptions. This includes expanding access to reliable internet connectivity, especially in remote areas.
- iv. **Support for Education:** Provide comprehensive support for students affected by the shutdown, including resources for online education, alternative examination arrangements, and mental health services to cope with the stress and uncertainty.
- v. **Humanitarian Assistance:** Collaborate with humanitarian organizations to provide holistic support to internally displaced families, offering essential services, educational opportunities, and mental health resources.
- vi. **Promoting Economic Recovery:** Extend support to entrepreneurs and businesses affected by the shutdown by offering financial assistance, creating incentives for online operations, and facilitating the recovery of the local economy.
- vii. **Advocacy for Online Freedom:** Vigorous advocacy required for policies that protect online freedom and oppose restrictions on internet usage that infringe on citizens' rights to access information and express themselves.