



Stakeholders Conference

BRIDGING 'MANIPUR'S NEW DIGITAL DIVIDE'

From Strengthening Access
to Healing Divisions &
Fostering Peace, Unity, and
Development AND
overcoming Impacts of
World's Longest Internet
Shutdown for effective
Response, Recovery,
Resilience

September 27, 2024

Manipur Central
University Campus,
Imphal

Time: 9:30 AM – 5:00 PM

Mode: Hybrid | Main

Conference: Manipur
University Campus

ORGANISED BY:

COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL AND DIGITAL
DEVELOPMENT (CSDD), DIGITAL
EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION,

CO-ORGANISED BY:

DEPARTMENT OF COMPUTER SCIENCE,
MANIPUR CENTRAL UNIVERSITY, IMPHAL



1. INTRODUCTION

The prolonged internet shutdown from mid of 2023 until recently, in Manipur due to the recent ethnic conflicts has deepened existing social rifts and created a new "digital divide." This divide not only limited access to essential information and services, but also amplified misinformation and online hate speech and dividing the wider Manipuri society further. This overall affects Manipur's quest for a digital society, based on sound principles of digital rights and justice, and limits efforts of the government and other agencies, to restore normalcy. Rebuilding Manipur's digital society is crucial for healing the wounds of conflict, fostering peace, and ensuring equitable development, and enabling people of Manipur to be effective digital citizens in rising digital society and economy.

2. MANIPUR'S DIGITAL CONUNDRUM

The State's access ecosystem has been limited and restricted even prior to the first shutdown in May 2023. The State has 22,327 sq. km of area, with a population of 28,55,794, covering 2582 villages. The population density among the districts of Manipur is widely varying and in 7 out of 16 districts it is less than 50. It indicates that a major part of these districts is sparsely populated, and villages are scattered (av. village density 1.2 villages/10 sq. Km.).

Table 1: Overall Telecom Statistics of Manipur

Parameters	Manipur			All India		
	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
Subscriber base (wireline + wireless) (In Mn)	2.38	1.03	1.35	1171.92	520.30	651.61
Tele-density (wireline + wireless) (In %)	74.14	47.56	129.82	84.86	58.01	134.62
Wireless Subscribers (In Mn)	2.34	1.03	1.31	1145.45	518.31	627.14
Wireless Tele-density (In %)	72.83	47.43	126.06	82.94	57.79	129.56
Wireline Subscribers (In Mn)	0.04	0.003	0.04	26.47	1.99	24.48
Wireline Tele-density (In %)	1.31	0.14	3.76	1.92	0.22	5.06

Source: TRAI

From above Table, it is observed that rural wireless tele-density in Manipur (having 71% population) is less than that of all India average even though the urban tele-density is comparable to that of all India average. This reflects inadequate mobile coverage in rural areas in this state.

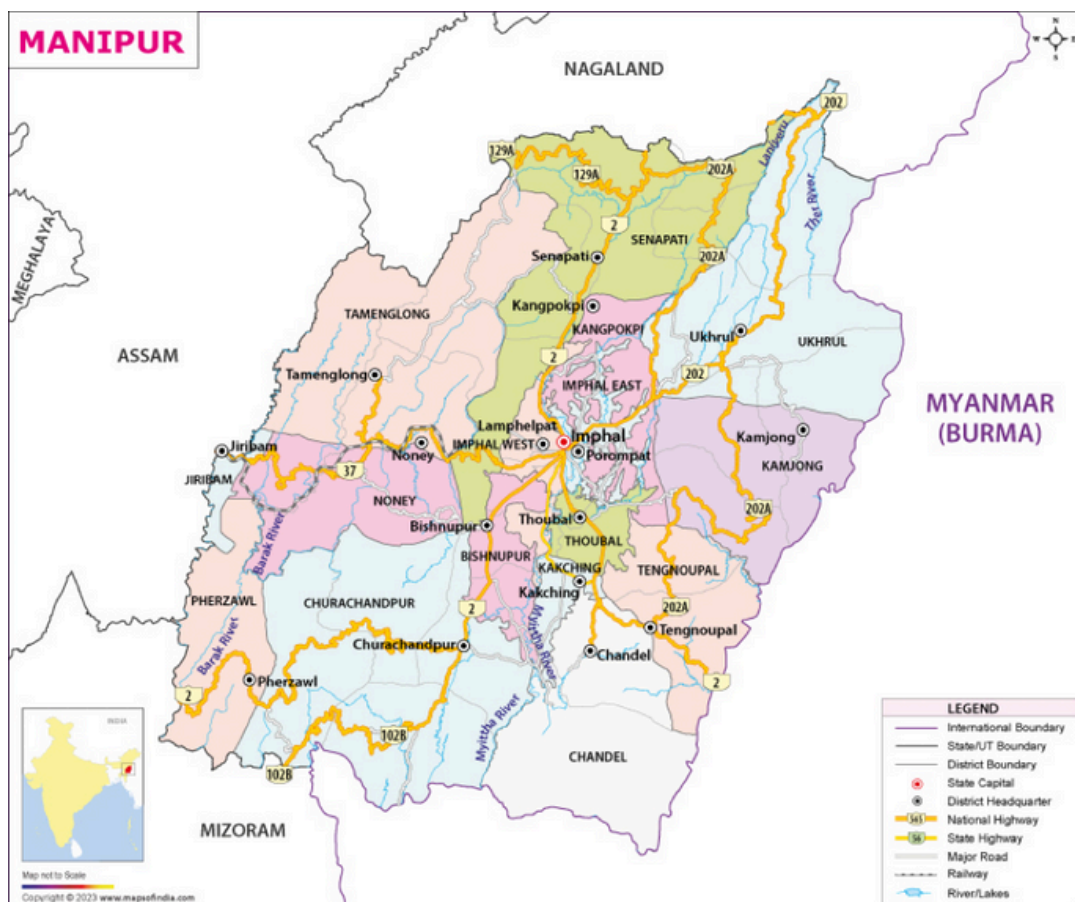
Manipur has 833 villages unconnected in 2022, which is a significant gap as compared to all India comparison. The following Table 2 gives a picture of unconnected villages in Manipur as compared to other States in NER.

Table 2: State wise number of villages that does not have Mobile coverage

State	Total no of inhabited villages (2022)	No of uncovered villages in 2012	No of uncovered villages in 2022	% of villages yet to have mobile coverage in 2022		
Assam	26429	3536	796	3.01	520.30	651.61
Manipur	4091	634	833	20.36	58.01	134.62
Mizoram	877	268	163	18.59	518.31	627.14
Nagaland	1658	143	340	21.68	57.79	129.56

Access during Shutdown and Around: In the light of the above state of Access, and due to lack of latest data sets, it is only strongly assumed that the above scenario has drastically and unimaginable changed during the shutdown period (May 2023 – April 2024) in Manipur. While the things are made to be normal again, the access scenario is hugely affected due to cost, lack of devices, thousands living in refugee camps, and uncertainty and unpredictability of mobile connectivity and even in broadband access, beyond the Imphal city.

- Manipur's Access from May 2023 (when first shutdown happened) till May 2024: From May 3, 2023, Manipur experienced the longest internet shutdown, extending over 200 days due to ethnic violence. Initially imposed in Churachandpur and Pherzawl on April 28, 2023, the shutdown became state-wide. The government cited the need to curb misinformation and maintain peace. By December 3, 2023, the government gradually lifted shutdowns in non-violent areas, ending the extensive blackout, with future shutdowns limited to conflict zones only. The internet shutdown severely impacted access to internet, information, and essential services. This extended blackout, lasting over 143 days, disrupted students' education, aid workers' coordination efforts, and economic activities, particularly affecting small businesses and startups. The claim that shutdowns prevent misinformation and maintain peace faced criticism for being ineffective and causing more harm than good, including hampering disaster response, disrupting healthcare, and services.



- How fake news, misinformation, disinformation played out loud between the groups in Manipur? The ethnic violence in Manipur, has been significantly fuelled by the rampant spread of fake news and misinformation. Starting on May 3, 2023, the unrest has claimed over 160 lives. Security agencies identified the circulation of false information and misleading videos as key factors inciting violence. This highlights the role of disinformation in escalating tensions. Local newspapers' lack of control over biased or fake news further exacerbated the situation, with reports of potential attacks by the majority community fuelling additional unrest. In response, the police established a 'Rumour Free Number' to verify information and curb disinformation. However, despite these efforts, controlling the spread of fake news remains a significant challenge, complicating efforts to restore peace and stability in Manipur.

3. PURPOSE OF THE CONFERENCE

This conference aims to:

1. **Understand the Impact:** Assess the extent of the 'new digital divide' over and above the traditional digital divide, its impact on different communities, and the role of digital platforms and agencies in exacerbating or mitigating digital access and online conflict.
2. **Forge a Shared Vision:** Develop a collective vision for a digitally inclusive and peaceful Manipur for effective Response, Recovery and Resilience to promote digital peacebuilding initiatives for healing and reconciliation.
3. **Co-create Solutions:** Identify concrete actions and strategies to rebuild digital infrastructure, promote digital literacy, counter online hate, and foster reconciliation through digital means.

4. KEY THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Bridging the Old and New Digital Divide:

- Infrastructure:
 - How can we rapidly rebuild and expand digital infrastructure (internet access, mobile networks) to address old and new access gaps in Manipur, with focus on underserved areas?
 - What innovative / alternative solutions (community networks, public Wi-Fi) can we explore to provide reliable Internet access?
 - How can we make information and digital services affordable and accessible to all in the post shutdown digital needs?
- Digital Literacy:
 - How to address the most pressing digital literacy needs today for different communities (youth, women, rural populations) in Manipur to access critical information and services?
 - What role can schools, colleges, community centers, and NGOs play in mitigating and overcoming the new information and digital divides?

2. Avoiding / Overcoming Shutdowns and Maintaining Access Sustainability

- Avoiding & Overcoming Shutdowns:
 - Can Internet Shutdowns be avoided to avoid the collateral damages?
 - What alternative mechanisms can work better to avoid shutdowns in conflict and difficult situations?
 - What role can internet diplomacy play between government agencies, media platforms, and local agencies to avoid complete shutdowns affecting life and livelihoods?

3. Fostering Digital Peacebuilding:

- Countering Digital Hate and Distrust:
 - How can we effectively identify and counter hate speech and misinformation online to bridge Manipur's 'New Digital Divide' between groups and communities?
 - What role should social media platforms play in content moderation and promoting responsible online behaviour?
 - How can we empower local communities to monitor and report harmful content?
 - How to address digital distrust in government agencies and services?
 - How to address enormous fake news, misinformation, disinformation (perpetuating a new digital divide within Manipuri Society) in existing, post violence Manipur society through targeted digital media information literacy and provisions?
- Promoting Digital Reconciliation:
 - How can we use digital platforms to foster dialogue, understanding, and empathy between communities?
 - What kinds of online spaces can be created to facilitate reconciliation and peacebuilding?
 - Can digital storytelling and media be used to amplify positive narratives and counter stereotypes?
 - What role can stakeholders and agencies (schools, colleges, government agencies, NGOs) play to bring and promote digital reconciliation?

4. Building a New Digital Ecosystem for Manipur as a Way Forward:

- A New Digital Roadmap:
 - Mapping the new digital needs amidst challenges?
 - Elements and strategies for a new digital roadmap for digital inclusion and transformation in Manipur?
 - Why and how to engage the key stakeholders in building the roadmap?
 - How can we ensure that essential services (healthcare, education, government services) are accessible online, especially in remote areas?
 - What safeguards can be put in place to protect user privacy and data security?

5. STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION

Active participation from diverse stakeholders is crucial:

- **Affected Communities:** Representatives from affected communities, women's groups, youth organizations, and rural residents.
- **Government Officials:** Representatives from IT, education, social welfare, home affairs, and other relevant departments.
- **Civil Society Organizations:** NGOs working on peacebuilding, human rights, digital inclusion, and community development.
- **Tech Sector:** Representatives from internet service providers, mobile operators, social media platforms, and local tech entrepreneurs.
- **Academic and Research Institutions:** Experts on digital society, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding.

6. OUTCOME

- A comprehensive understanding of the new digital divide in Manipur.
- A set of actionable recommendations for bridging the new digital divide and fostering peace, unity, and development.
- A network of stakeholders committed to advancing digital inclusion and reconciliation in Manipur and beyond.
- Increased awareness of the importance of digital peacebuilding in Manipur.
- A roadmap for building a sustainable digital ecosystem in the State for a vibrant Manipur Digital Society and Economy.

ANNEXURE

Conference Programme Outline (Draft)

Bridging 'Manipur's New Digital Divide': From Strengthening Access to Healing Divisions & Fostering Peace, Unity, and Development in Overcoming Impacts of Longest Internet Shutdown for Effective Response, Recovery and Resilience

- **Opening Ceremony:**

- Welcome Address
- Introduction to the Conference Objectives
- Keynote Speech: The Impact of Manipur's Internet Shutdown on Peace, Unity, and Development

- **Panel Discussion 1: Bridging the Old and New Digital Divide in Manipur**

- Understanding the Digital Divide in Manipur: Pre and Post conflict Challenges
- The Impact of the Internet Shutdown on Existing Disparities
- Strategies for Expanding Access to Technology and Digital Literacy

- **Panel Discussion 2: Overcoming Shutdowns and Maintaining Access Sustainability**

- Exploring and Building Legal and Regulatory Frameworks for sustaining Internet Access during conflicts and challenges & Minimising Impacts
- Internet diplomacy and alternative mechanisms as a measure to overcome shutdowns between media platforms, government agencies and others

- **Panel Discussion 3: Fostering Digital Peacebuilding in Practice**

- Countering Digital Hate & Distrust
- Promoting Digital Peace Building

- **Panel Discussion 4: Building a New Digital Ecosystem for Manipur as a Way Forward**

- Developing a Roadmap for Digital Transformation
- Identifying Key Stakeholders and Partnerships
- Developing Actionable Recommendations for Stakeholders