INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN MEGHALAYA

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ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FOR AN EMERGING DIGITAL SOCIETY

Internet Shutdowns are defined as intentional disruptions in internet services by government authorities. This practice has been highly adopted in the Indian context, and according to Internet Shutdown Tracker (2022), India has registered 690 internet shutdowns. In addition, a report by SFLC.in titled Let the Net Work: Internet Shutdowns in India (2022) has provided a map of the distribution of reasons for internet shutdowns in India. It was found that terrorist threats accounted for 41 %, communal tension registered 24%, protests and political tension reported for 6 % and cheating in exams recorded 4 %.

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[1] Internet Shutdown Tracker is a digital advocacy group in India that monitors the internet Shutdowns in India. Retrieved from https://internetshutdowns.in

[2] Let the Net Work (2022). SFLC.in & InternetShutdowns.in. Retrieved from https://sflc.in/internet-shutdowns-india-2022

The duration of internet shutdowns varies from state to state and context to context. In the case of Meghalaya, internet shutdowns have been adopted a total of 16 times which have been spread out across different districts in the state. Gradually, this practice has become a reoccurring trend over the last few years.

Internet Shutdowns in Meghalaya have generally been adopted under the banner of 'preventive' measures. The suspension order focused on the use of social media applications like WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, which have been stated to be used for the transmission of information which has the potential to lead to a breakdown of law and order. However, the practice of internet shutdowns leads to questions about its effectiveness. To highlight some of the complexities surrounding internet shutdowns in Meghalaya. The case of the most recent shutdown will be explored to identify its practicality of use in today's emerging digital context.

The United Nations (UN), on the 13th of May 2022, in their report[3] on Internet Shutdowns, highlighted the concerns of its practice. They stated that "Shutdowns are powerful markers of sharply deteriorating human rights situations" and further argued that over the past decade, they have tended to be imposed during heightened political tensions, with at least 225 shutdowns recorded during public demonstrations relating to social, political or economic grievances. The UN viewed shutdowns as restricting human rights monitoring and reporting, especially in the context of armed conflicts and during mass demonstrations, the fact that people could not communicate and promptly report abuses seems to have contributed to further insecurity and violence, including serious human rights violations.

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[3] Internet Shutdowns: trends, causes, legal implications, and impact on human rights (2022). Retrieved from https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/341/55/PDF/G2234155.pdf?OpenElement

[4] Meghalaya: Internet Data services restored in state after 7 days (2022). India Today NE. Retrieved from https://www.indiatodayne.in/meghalaya/story/meghalaya-internet-data-services-restored-state-after-7-days-situation-peaceful-confirms-administration-475970-2022-11-28#:~:text=The%20Meghalaya%20Government%20on%20November,including%20one%20Assam%20Forest%20Guard

Mukroh Border Violence

On the 22nd of November 2022, the Home Department of the Government of Meghalaya resorted to an internet shutdown in seven districts after tensions erupted in the borderlands between Meghalaya and Assam. This led to the death of six individuals – five villagers from Meghalaya and one Forest Guard from Assam. As reported by India Today NE (2022), the internet shutdown in the seven districts was limited to mobile internet suspension, and the internet was restored on the 28th of November, 2022. Before the internet shutdown, videos of violent scenes from the incident were circulated, such as gunshots fired and the lifeless bodies of the villagers who were shot. These videos took on a form of virality among local social media users. For the public, these videos triggered emotions of anger and condemnation. However, media reports from different agencies varied on what took place. Further, both governments' positions varied on the incident and laid territorial claims of the event occurring within their borders. In addition, their positions and narratives on what transpired in Mukroh differed as Meghalaya took a position of 'unprovoked' firing.

In contrast, the Assam Government, initially after the shooting, presented the situation as a case of 'unnecessary and unprovoked' firing. However, recent statements[5] from the Home Minister of Assam have changed. He stated that "five people died as a result of police firing, which was done in self-defence and for the protection of government properties".

Contextualising Border Disputes

To comprehend a deeper understanding of the events that transpired, one has to reflect on the socio-political history of the North Eastern Region (NER) and its construction. The North East is home to multiple ethnicities and identities, and this amplifies the political fragility of the region. The NER has witnessed various changes in its socio-political history from the colonial period to the post-colonial state formation. Border conflicts and territoriality are not novel and continue to hinder the land. Haokip (2023) states that the colonial and post-colonial demarcations of states arbitrarily have led to ethnic/tribal movements and contestations over regional borders. He further argues that:

> "the problem has never been the lack of technology and expertise to demarcate the state boundaries but the political will to solve the border issues by engaging the border people. After all, they are the ones who live there, not those who sit on committees and commissions or practise law at the apex court or are elected as members of the Parliament or State Assembly."

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[5] Assam Police firing in Mukroh was in Self Defence, says Himanta Biswa Sharma (2022). Retrieved from https://scroll.in/latest/1040514/assam-police-firing-in-mukroh-was-in-self-defence-says-himanta-biswa-sarma

In addition, modern capitalist economic activities (such as resource extraction) combined with ethno-territorial assertions have added new dimensions to border disputes, as the loss of land is seen as losing social and political power and prestige (Bhaumik, 2009; Karlsson, 2023). As per a report by The Economic Times (2021), border disputes between Assam, on the one hand, and other neighbouring states have led to approximately the death of a total of 157 individuals and injured at least 361 persons and displaced more than 65,000 from 1979 to 2021. In addition, claims and counterclaims between states and the validity of what is acceptable have added to the complexities.

Social Media and Conflict

Social media has often been regarded as a tool to enhance democratic participation and has the potential to offer alternative narratives to contest and challenge the power dynamics of traditional mainstream media and the state. However, the rapid pace at which information can be disseminated has also contributed to emerging challenges of misinformation and polarization. During socio-political conflicts, when communities are emotionally engaged social media narratives can intensify. Social media usage not only represents individual identities but can also lead to larger collective identities. In the case of North East India, collective identities are negotiated depending on the context. For example, in the case of the Anti-CAA protest, the social media content that emerged from the region was a collective voice that demanded the act to be withdrawn due to fears of demographic changes for minority ethnic/tribal communities in the region. However, in the case of Mukroh firing incident and other border disputes, social media content takes the form of 'us' versus 'them' within the region.

Social media is an embodied and sensory experience, and the lines between the 'online' and 'offline' are blurring as our everyday realities are gradually being integrated into digital spaces. In addition, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram are designed to promote engagement and, by their capitalistic principle, are driven by drawing traffic to content to amplify viewership. Content metrics and indicators such as 'likes' and 'views' have further promoted an element of pursuing 'virality', and often extreme or sensational content receives more visibility. This capitalistic reward system primarily drives sensational views on social media. During socio-political conflict

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[6] Interstate border clashes between 1979 to 2021 led to death of at least 157 in Assam (2021). The Economic Times. Retrieved from https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/interstate-border-classes-between-1979-and-2021-led-to-the-death-of-at-least-157-in-assam/articleshow/85211561.cms?from=mdr

"comments" on new threads significantly increase, and the lack of consistency in media reports adds to the information wars between users from varying regions. Yet, it must be noted that not everyone on social media engages in 'comments' or produces content, but users are bound to consume information from social or political actors. The challenges for consumers to verify information in this hyper-visualised and hyper-mediated digital world is a daunting task as information is produced and coproduced constantly. Furthermore, social media has become a space where most individuals carry their identity, aspirations, views, history, and opinions (Passah, 2021).

Dynamics of Internet Shutdowns in Meghalaya

A report (2021)[7] by The Wire highlighted that internet shutdowns cost the country almost $2.8 billion in 2020. The high cost is a combination of the long hours (8,927 – also the highest in the report) and the many people (10.3 million) which internet shutdowns in India affected. Furthermore, India leads the world in the category of the most number of shutdowns imposed, with 690 (Internet Shutdown Tracker, 2022). However, a database for the cost of Internet Shutdowns for individual states in the country has yet to be produced.

In the case of Meghalaya, the most prolonged blackout was in 2018, when ethnic conflicts emerged in the Them Iew Mawlong area (also referred to as Punjabi Lane). The particular shutdown lasted for 13 days. However, internet shutdowns in Meghalaya are not limited to 'ethnic conflicts', and the case of the Anti-CAA protests was an instance which made citizens feel that the 'intent' of the internet shutdown was to suppress their voices (Passah, 2021). Considering the importance of digital media and, in today's day and age, shutdowns during protests and demonstrations can be viewed as a form of silencing as participation is restricted. The internet shutdown during the Anti-CAA highlighted the limitations of digital activism, especially for populations in the North East which have been historically marginalised in their political participation. In today's context, social media offers a space for alternative discourses to be produced. However, internet shutdowns in the case of the North East Region restrict their visibility under the banner of 'preventive' measures. This can be viewed as a reflection of the power dynamics between the state and citizens.

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[7] Cost of Internet Shutdowns in India (2021). Retrieved from https://thewire.in/rights/the-cost-of-internet-shutdowns

Where do we go from here?

Meghalaya, at present, is a digital paradox as, on the one hand, the government is constantly advocating and promoting digital public services and tapping heavily into the visual economy of social media for state 'branding' and promotion, yet, shutdowns have become the de facto mechanism to deal with inter and intra state conflicts. In addition, the digital divide is relatively large compared to other states. As per the National Family[8] Health Survey- 5 (2019-2020), Meghalaya registered 57.8 % of urban women who interacted with the internet, and rural women recorded 28 %. Urban men reported 59.2 %, and rural men reported 38.5 %. In addition, the digital divide is multifaceted and is not limited to 'access', and through an intersectional lens 'access' can cut across age, gender, class and so forth. Furthermore, it was alarming to view NITI Aayog's[9] SDG report for the North Eastern Region (2020-21) as Meghalaya registered the lowest for the region with 14.2 % for the category of the number of schools with access to computational pedagogy services. With the existing structures and lack of digital literacy, internet shutdowns are the least of Meghalaya's problems. Without access to the internet and digital literacy, Meghalaya's digital future looks grim, as citizens will be relegated to mere consumers of the digital economy rather than active producers within it. Also, the lack of digital literacy could explain the rampant rates of misinformation users consume on social media.

As the state transitions from analog to digital services, internet shutdowns further hamper[10] the prospects of digitalisation and employment. A report by The Meghalayan (2022) during the Mukroh internet shutdown highlighted the grievances of youths who have tapped into digital opportunities for employment, such as Swiggy deliveries and Rapido Captains. These platforms have gained popularity among urban youths with the current state of unemployment. Further, the report stated that despite the internet shutdown, violence broke out days after.

The above report represents the importance of refraining from a techno-deterministic outlook on society and conflict. Instead, a holistic approach is needed to rethink how we view socio-political conflicts in the internet age.

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[8] National Family Health Survey 5 (NFHS-5). Fact Sheet- Key indicators (2019-2020). Retrieved from https://main.mohfw.gov.in/sites/default/files/NFHS-5_Phase-I.pdf

[9] NITI Aayog Indicators for SDG-4 focus on indicators for quality and inclusive education for all. Retrieved from http://www.sdgindia2030.mospi.gov.in/dashboard/india

[10] Pain of living without mobile internet (2022). The Meghalayan. Retrieved from https://themeghalayan.com/pain-of-living-without-mobile-internet/

For instance, the internet shutdown during the Mukroh firing merely acted as a mask of the deeper underlying socio-structural problems within and beyond the North East Region. Border disputes have been ongoing in the region and have intensified. Furthermore, internet shutdowns remove accountability from governments and socio-political actors and focus on the 'internet' or 'lack of it'. With the contemporary political culture of exclusivity and identity politics, which has transcended itself from the national to the state level, it is expected that conflicts will intensify.

Governments must reimagine mechanisms to ensure internet shutdowns do not hamper livelihoods and adopt it only as a 'last resort'. Furthermore, pressing issues such as the digital divide in Meghalaya must be addressed to build an inclusive digital ecosystem which promotes digital literacy, digital skills and access for all. While tech giants such as Facebook often adopt branding phrases such as "bringing people together and closer", it is also essential to reflect on whether social media has connected or disconnected people through their algorithms and infrastructure. With the plethora of information available online, individuals validate their own beliefs and values through 'echo chambers' promoted by social media, which increases polarisation during the socio-political conflict.

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