Manipur's Digital Rights Crisis: Universal Access and Internet Governance Amid Ethnic Conflict

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I.   Introduction

The intersection of technology and human rights has become increasingly critical in the 21st century, particularly in regions experiencing conflict and instability. The ability to access and utilize digital platforms has transformed societies, enabling individuals to exercise fundamental freedoms, participate in democratic processes, and access essential services. However, in times of crisis, governments often resort to measures that restrict these digital rights, raising concerns about their necessity, proportionality, and impact on affected populations. This report critically examines the digital rights crisis in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur, which has been grappling with a protracted ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities during 2023-2024. Against the backdrop of this violence, the state experienced an unprecedentedly long internet shutdown, significantly impacting universal access and internet governance. This analysis delves into the historical and socio-political context of the conflict, the specifics of the internet shutdown, its multifaceted impact on the lives and livelihoods of the people, the implications for digital rights, the diverse perspectives on the shutdown's justification, comparisons with similar situations globally, and the inherent challenges to internet governance in Manipur. The extended nature of both the ethnic conflict and the digital blockade in Manipur presents a unique case study that necessitates in-depth scrutiny to understand the intricate relationship between conflict, technology, and human rights in the digital age.

The right to access the internet is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of human rights in the contemporary world.[1] This perspective emphasizes that the internet serves as a fundamental tool for individuals to exercise and enjoy their rights to freedom of expression and opinion, alongside other essential human rights. The internet's unique capacity to facilitate the instantaneous and cost-effective seeking, receiving, and sharing of information across geographical boundaries is considered paramount. This capability acts as a crucial enabler for a wide array of other human rights and significantly contributes to economic, social, and political development, thereby fostering overall human progress.[1] UNESCO also underscores the fundamental nature of the right to access information as an essential component of a democratic society.[2] The organization actively advocates for and promotes access to reliable information, empowering citizens to make well-informed decisions and hold their governments accountable. This commitment to transparency and accountability is central to UNESCO's mission in the digital age.

In regions afflicted by conflict, the significance of digital rights becomes even more pronounced, while the ramifications of internet shutdowns on fundamental freedoms are potentially more severe.[3] Internet shutdowns in such areas can drastically impede access to information that could be life-saving, critically hinder the delivery of humanitarian aid to vulnerable populations, and obstruct the crucial work of documenting human rights abuses as they occur. These digital blackouts often disproportionately affect communities already marginalized and can exacerbate

existing inequalities by cutting off access to essential services and communication channels. Therefore, understanding the interplay between conflict and digital rights is essential for safeguarding human rights in an increasingly interconnected world. This report argues that the digital rights crisis in Manipur, characterized by a prolonged internet shutdown amidst ethnic conflict, serves as a critical example of the challenges and consequences that arise when governments deploy such measures in volatile situations.

II.   Background of the Ethnic Conflict in Manipur (2023-2024)

Manipur, a state in Northeast India, is characterized by a distinct geographical division between the Imphal Valley, predominantly inhabited by the Meitei community, and the surrounding hill regions, home to the Kuki-Zo and other tribal communities.[4] This geographical separation has historically contributed to the state's complex socio-political landscape.[4] The ethnic composition of Manipur is diverse, comprising the Meitei, Naga, Kuki-Zo, and other smaller groups, each with their own distinct linguistic, cultural, and religious identities.[4] Long-standing tensions among these communities have revolved around issues of land ownership, control over resources, and political representation.[8] These historical and ethnic divisions have long been fault lines within the state, rendering it particularly susceptible to internal conflict.[8]

Adding another layer to this complex ethnic mosaic are religious differences. The Meitei community is predominantly Hindu, while the Kuki-Zo community is mostly Christian.[5] This religious schism often mirrors the existing ethnic divide, contributing to and deepening inter-community rivalries.[12] Religious identity can become a significant marker of group affiliation and can further exacerbate ethnic tensions, sometimes leading to a communal dimension in conflicts, as evidenced by reports of attacks on religious structures during the recent violence in Manipur.[4]

The relationship between the Meitei and Kuki communities has a history marked by periods of both cooperation and conflict.[7] Historically, the Kuki people were settled in the hills of Manipur by Meitei kings, initially serving as a buffer between the Meiteis in the Imphal Valley and the Naga tribes.[7] However, over time, tensions arose, including the Kuki Rebellion against British rule in the early 20th century and, more recently, clashes between the Kuki and Naga communities in the 1990s, partly fueled by Naga nationalist aspirations.[7] The Kukis also developed their own political aspirations, including the demand for a separate 'Kukiland'.[7] Therefore, the ethnic conflict that erupted in 2023-2024 is not an isolated event but rather part of a longer history of complex and sometimes fraught inter-community relations in Manipur. Understanding this historical context is crucial for comprehending the depth and multifaceted nature of the current crisis.

The immediate triggers for the eruption of widespread violence in Manipur during 2023-2024 can be traced to a confluence of factors, with a significant proximate cause being the Manipur High Court's order in April 2023 regarding the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for the Meitei community.[4] This order seemingly recommended that the state government consider granting ST status to the dominant Meitei community, a decision that was met with strong opposition from the existing tribal communities, particularly the Kuki-Zo.[4] The Kuki-Zo community, who already benefit from ST status, protested this potential move, fearing that the inclusion of the Meitei, who constitute the majority population and already hold significant political and economic power in the state, would lead to a dilution of their affirmative action benefits, including protection of land and quotas for government jobs and education.[5] This High Court order acted as a catalyst, igniting long-simmering resentments and anxieties between the communities.

The tensions that had been brewing following the High Court's directive came to a head on May 3, 2023, when tribal communities organized a 'Tribal Solidarity March' across various districts of Manipur to protest against the Meitei demand for ST status.[4] This march, which included the Kuki-Zo and other tribal groups, turned violent in several areas, with clashes breaking out between Meitei and Kuki-Zo groups, particularly in the Churachandpur district, where the Kuki-Zo community is concentrated.[4] Simultaneously, counter-rallies and counter-blockades were held by the Meitei community, further escalating the already charged atmosphere.[4] These initial

clashes rapidly spread across the state, indicating a high degree of pre-existing tension and a capacity for swift mobilization within both communities.

A significant factor contributing to the escalation of the conflict was the perceived bias of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led state government under Chief Minister N. Biren Singh, who is himself an ethnic Meitei.[11] The state government was largely perceived by the Kuki-Zo community as being pro-Meitei, leading to a deep erosion of trust and a heightened sense of marginalization.[11] Policies and rhetoric emanating from the Chief Minister were seen as particularly inflammatory and as vilifying the Kuki community, with accusations of illegal poppy cultivation, forest encroachment, drug smuggling, and harbouring illegal immigrants from Myanmar being levelled against them.[4] These perceptions of state bias further fuelled the Kuki-Zo community's opposition to the government's actions and likely contributed to the intensity and duration of the conflict.

Several government policies and the associated rhetoric also played a crucial role in inflaming ethnic tensions and were viewed as discriminatory by the Kuki-Zo community.[4] These included eviction drives targeting Kuki tribal villagers from forest areas, a "war on drugs" that disproportionately focused on poppy cultivation in Kuki-dominated hill districts, and repeated accusations by the Chief Minister and other Meitei community members accusing the Kuki-Zo of being illegal migrants from Myanmar.[4] The Chief Minister's public pronouncements often singled

out the Kuki-Zo community, using derogatory terms like "narco-terrorists" and "poppy cultivators," further contributing to an environment of mistrust and hostility.[11] These policies and the accompanying rhetoric acted as catalysts, exacerbating the existing tensions between the two communities and creating a fertile ground for the outbreak of widespread violence.

Once initiated, the ethnic violence in Manipur spread rapidly across the state, targeting minority communities in each area.[4] The violence quickly engulfed the Kuki-dominated Churachandpur town and the Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley, with each community becoming the target in the respective areas.[4] This widespread violence led to the formation of distinct ethnic enclaves and a significant degree of spatial segregation, as members of both communities fled from areas where they were in the minority, seeking refuge in areas dominated by their own ethnic group.[8] This physical separation of communities signifies a deep and potentially long-lasting fracture in social relations within the state.

The conflict resulted in a high number of casualties, with reports indicating that hundreds of people have been killed and tens of thousands have been displaced from their homes.[4] Additionally, the violence led to the widespread destruction of property, with thousands of houses and hundreds of religious structures, including temples and churches, being vandalized or burnt down.[4] The sheer scale of casualties and displacement points to a severe and ongoing humanitarian crisis in Manipur.

In the wake of the violence, armed groups and militias emerged on both sides of the ethnic divide.[4] Both the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities formed village defence forces to protect themselves, and militant groups that had been dormant for years resurfaced.[11] A particularly concerning development was the looting of large quantities of arms and ammunition from state police armouries by Meitei mobs, further escalating the conflict and complicating the security situation.[4] These developments indicate a breakdown of state authority and an increased risk of prolonged and intensified conflict.

Tragically, the ethnic conflict has also been marred by numerous reports of human rights violations, including instances of sexual violence.[11] Several Kuki women have reported incidents of sexual violence and rape at the hands of Meitei mobs.[17] These reports highlight the devastating impact of the conflict on the safety and dignity of individuals, particularly women, and underscore the urgent need for accountability and justice for the victims.

Beyond the immediate physical violence, the ethnic conflict in Manipur has also caused significant economic disruption, affecting various aspects of life, including businesses, education, and access to healthcare.[6] Businesses, both small and large, have faced substantial financial losses due to the violence and the subsequent internet shutdown, leading to layoffs and concerns about long-term economic stagnation.[22] The education sector has been severely disrupted due

to the violence, curfews, and the extended internet shutdown, impacting students at all levels.[25] Access to healthcare has also been significantly affected, with reports of attacks on health facilities and healthcare workers, as well as disruptions in the supply of essential medicines and services.[27] This widespread socio-economic disruption has further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the state.

III.   The 2023-2024 Internet Shutdown in Manipur

Following the outbreak of ethnic violence on May 3, 2023, the government of Manipur swiftly imposed a state-wide internet shutdown.[4] This marked the beginning of a digital blockade that would persist, with intermittent partial restorations and reimpositions, for a significant duration throughout 2023.[28] The digital blackout in Manipur during 2023 was exceptionally prolonged, lasting for over 5,000 hours, which equates to approximately 212 days.[31] This period included 44 separate orders issued by the government, with only a brief three-day reprieve from the restrictions.[31] Mobile internet services were suspended for extensive periods, while broadband internet was sometimes partially restored, often with specific conditions and restrictions imposed.[34] The on-again, off-again nature of internet access created a climate of uncertainty and significantly prolonged the difficulties faced by the residents of Manipur.

The internet shutdowns continued into 2024, although the durations of these suspensions were potentially shorter compared to the extensive blockade of the previous year.[28] In 2024, Manipur experienced 11 instances of internet shutdowns, totaling 1,104 hours of disruption.[28] These continued suspensions were imposed by the authorities in response to the ongoing ethnic conflict and related protests that continued to flare up in the state.[29] The persistence of these shutdowns into the following year underscores that the underlying issues driving the conflict and the government's reliance on this measure as a response remained largely unchanged.

The extended internet shutdown in Manipur during 2023 ranked among the longest digital blackouts experienced globally.[31] In fact, it was reported to be the longest internet shutdown in the world during that year.[31] India, as a whole, has consistently recorded the highest number of government-imposed internet shutdowns globally, and the situation in Manipur significantly contributed to this concerning statistic.[30] This highlights the exceptional severity of the digital blockade imposed on the people of Manipur.

The authorities in Manipur cited several reasons for the imposition and continuation of the internet shutdown. A primary justification was the need to maintain law and order within the state, which was experiencing intense ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities.[4] The government stated that these measures were necessary to control the volatile situation and prevent further escalation of violence.[4] Another key reason cited by the authorities was the prevention of the spread of misinformation, rumors, hate speech, and other

inflammatory content on social media platforms.[28] The government expressed concerns that "anti-social elements" might exploit social media to disseminate images, hate speech, and hate video messages with the intention of inciting public passion, which could have serious repercussions for the already fragile law and order situation in the state.[30] There was also an apprehension among the authorities that such content could further exacerbate the existing ethnic tensions and lead to more violence. Additionally, the government voiced concerns about the potential for anti-social elements to use the internet to coordinate and mobilize, thereby further disrupting peace and order within the state.[32]

The internet shutdown in Manipur was legally justified by the authorities through the invocation of the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules, 2017 (and subsequently the updated 2024 rules), which are framed under the Telecommunications Act, 2023.[28] This legal framework in India grants the government the power to issue orders for the temporary suspension of telecom services, including internet services, in the event of a public emergency or in the interest of public safety.[30] Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), which permits state actions aimed at maintaining law and order, was also reportedly used as a legal basis for these restrictions.[57] However, concerns have been raised regarding the lack of a clear and precise definition of "public emergency" and "public safety" within this legal framework, leading to criticisms about the potential for misuse of these powers by the government.[37] Critics argue that the broad and somewhat ambiguous nature of these terms provides excessive discretionary authority to the government to impose internet shutdowns, even in situations that may not meet the threshold of a genuine public emergency. Furthermore, despite the Supreme Court of India's emphasis on the principles of necessity and proportionality when restricting internet access in the landmark 2020 case of Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India [29], reports from Manipur suggest an inconsistent implementation of these guidelines. While the Supreme Court had clearly articulated that any restrictions on internet access must be necessary, proportionate, and should employ the least restrictive means to achieve the intended objective, there are indications that the shutdown orders issued in Manipur often relied on vague justifications without providing substantive evidence of necessity or considering less drastic alternatives.[30] This lack of transparency and accountability in the process of issuing and extending internet shutdown orders raises serious concerns about the potential for arbitrary use of power and the infringement upon fundamental rights.

IV. Multifaceted Impact of the Internet Shutdown in Manipur

The extended internet shutdown in Manipur during 2023-2024 had a profound and multifaceted impact on various aspects of life within the state, affecting education, healthcare, businesses, and the fundamental right to access information and freedom of expression.

The education sector in Manipur experienced severe disruptions due to the prolonged internet blockade. Online classes, which had become increasingly vital, were halted, leaving students unable to access study materials, attend virtual lectures, or collaborate with peers.[25] Many students faced difficulties in registering for crucial examinations, as these processes often require online access.[25] The shutdown also posed significant challenges for students seeking higher education opportunities and internships outside the state, as they were unable to access necessary information or complete online application processes.[26] Career counseling agencies within Manipur also faced considerable obstacles, as their ability to provide online assessments and resources to students was severely limited.[25] The continuing violence and the lack of internet access even compelled some students to seek transfers from universities in Manipur to institutions in other parts of India to ensure the continuity of their education.[41] The prolonged disruption to education has raised concerns about long-term academic setbacks for students at all levels within the state.

The healthcare sector in Manipur also faced significant challenges as a result of the internet shutdown. Doctors and medical professionals experienced difficulties in seeking timely consultations with specialists and in sharing critical patient reports, which often rely on digital communication systems.[27] The shutdown hindered the provision of telemedicine services, which are particularly important in remote and conflict-affected areas where physical access to healthcare facilities may be limited.[68] Postgraduate medical trainees faced obstacles in accessing essential study materials and keeping abreast of recent advancements in their fields, as much of this information is now primarily available online.[52] Furthermore, there were reports of health supplies being looted during the ethnic conflict, and the communication disruptions caused by the internet shutdown may have exacerbated these challenges by hindering coordination and timely reporting.[27] The inability of healthcare workers and patients to communicate effectively and access vital information posed significant risks to public health within the state.

Businesses and livelihoods across Manipur were severely impacted by the extended internet shutdown. The inability to operate online and process digital payments resulted in significant economic losses for businesses of all sizes.[22] Many small and medium-sized enterprises that rely heavily on online platforms for sales, marketing, and customer interaction were particularly affected, with some even being forced to shut down.[22] The shutdown also disrupted access to digital banking services, leaving many individuals without the ability to access their funds for basic necessities.[30] Individuals who relied on internet-based employment and remote work opportunities were also significantly affected, as they were unable to perform their jobs.[43] The widespread economic disruption caused by the internet shutdown has raised concerns about the potential for long-term economic stagnation within the state.

The most fundamental impact of the internet shutdown in Manipur was on the access to

information and the freedom of expression of its residents. The prolonged digital blockade severely restricted the flow of information both within the state and to the outside world.[3] This created a significant information vacuum, potentially hindering accountability for actions taken during the conflict and possibly facilitating the spread of unverified or biased information. The internet shutdown also severely impeded the work of journalists and human rights monitors who rely on digital platforms for research, communication, and dissemination of information, potentially obscuring the full extent of the violence and human rights abuses.[15] Furthermore, the digital blackout effectively silenced dissenting voices and suppressed the ability of the population to engage in public protest and express their opinions on the ongoing situation.[3] In an increasingly digital world, the internet has become a crucial platform for civic engagement and the exercise of fundamental rights.

V.   Digital Rights in Manipur: Universal Access and Internet Governance

The concept of digital rights encompasses the fundamental human rights and legal rights that individuals possess in relation to the internet and other digital technologies.[1] Within this framework, universal access to the internet is increasingly recognized as a prerequisite for the effective exercise of other human rights.[1] The internet's role in facilitating communication, providing access to information, and enabling participation in various aspects of social, economic, and political life makes it integral to the realization of fundamental freedoms in the digital age. Internet governance, on the other hand, refers to the development and application of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programs that shape the evolution and use of the internet.[73] It involves a multitude of stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, civil society, international organizations, and the technical community.

The extended internet shutdown in Manipur significantly affected the realization of digital rights within the state. The most immediate impact was the violation of the right to freedom of expression and opinion.[3] By cutting off internet access, the government effectively silenced a significant portion of the population and prevented them from expressing their views, sharing information, and participating in online discussions about the conflict and its impact. The shutdown also severely hindered the right to access information [3], making it difficult for residents to stay informed about the situation, access news and updates, and connect with family and friends. Furthermore, as detailed in Section IV, the internet shutdown had a detrimental impact on the rights to education, healthcare, and economic activity, all of which are increasingly reliant on digital connectivity. The shutdown also likely affected the right to freedom of assembly and association, as the internet serves as a crucial platform for organizing and coordinating collective action.[1]

The situation in Manipur highlights several challenges to internet governance and the promotion

of universal access within the state. The ongoing ethnic conflict has created a highly sensitive and volatile environment, making it difficult to ensure both security and the protection of digital freedoms.[31] The government's reliance on internet shutdowns as a primary security measure raises concerns about its commitment to upholding digital rights and exploring less restrictive alternatives. Furthermore, the deep lack of trust between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, as well as between these communities and the government, hinders the development of effective and inclusive internet governance policies.[15] Allegations of political polarization and state bias in favor of the Meitei community further complicate the situation, potentially leading to discriminatory practices in internet governance decisions.[5] Ensuring universal access to the internet in Manipur also presents significant challenges due to the state's geographically diverse terrain, with remote hill areas often lacking adequate infrastructure and facing socio-economic disparities.[11] The interplay of these factors – ethnic conflict, security concerns, and digital rights – creates a complex and challenging landscape for internet governance and the promotion of universal access in Manipur.[10]

VI.   Analysing Perspectives on the Internet Shutdown

The government of Manipur articulated its rationale for the extended internet shutdown by emphasizing the need to prevent the escalation of violence through the control of inflammatory content and to maintain overall public order and security in a highly volatile environment.[30] Authorities also stated that the shutdown was crucial for countering the spread of misinformation and rumours on social media platforms, which they believed could further incite tensions between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities.[83]

However, human rights organizations and civil society groups have voiced significant concerns regarding the prolonged internet shutdown in Manipur.[72] They argue that such blanket restrictions constitute a clear violation of fundamental rights, including the rights to freedom of expression and access to information. These organizations have highlighted the disproportionate impact of the shutdown on essential services such as education and healthcare, as well as on the livelihoods of individuals and businesses that rely on internet connectivity. Furthermore, they contend that there is a lack of conclusive evidence to support the claim that widespread internet shutdowns are effective in preventing violence or curbing misinformation. In fact, some research suggests that such blackouts can exacerbate tensions and create an environment where rumours and unverified information can spread more easily in the absence of reliable and accessible news sources.[83] A key concern raised by human rights advocates is the potential for internet shutdowns to obscure human rights abuses and hinder efforts aimed at ensuring accountability for perpetrators.[36] By limiting the flow of information, these shutdowns can create a veil of secrecy, making it more difficult to monitor and report on the situation on the ground.

Analysing the necessity and proportionality of the internet shutdown in Manipur reveals a stark divergence in perspectives. The government likely justified its actions based on the exceptional circumstances of widespread ethnic violence and the perceived need to prevent even greater harm. However, counter-arguments emphasize the severe and far-reaching impact of a complete digital blackout on the fundamental rights of the entire population, suggesting that less restrictive alternatives should have been explored.[58] Critics argue that targeted measures aimed at addressing specific instances of hate speech or misinformation, such as content moderation and digital literacy campaigns, could be more proportionate and ultimately more effective than imposing a complete shutdown that affects everyone, including those who rely on the internet for essential purposes. The sheer duration of the internet shutdown in Manipur, which was the longest in India and among the longest globally in 2023, raises serious questions about its proportionality in relation to the stated objectives.[31]

VII.   Global Comparative Analysis

Examining case studies of internet shutdowns in other conflict zones globally provides valuable context for understanding the situation in Manipur. One notable example is Kashmir, India, which has experienced prolonged and frequent internet shutdowns in the context of ongoing political unrest and security concerns.[40] The extended internet shutdowns in Kashmir have had a devastating impact on human rights, the local economy, and the education of students.[31] The Kashmir experience offers a stark comparison, highlighting the long-term consequences of such measures in a region grappling with protracted conflict.

Another significant case is Myanmar, where the military junta has frequently employed internet shutdowns in the aftermath of the 2021 coup and during the ongoing civil conflict.[40] In Myanmar, internet shutdowns have been used as a tool to suppress resistance against the military regime and to potentially cover up human rights atrocities.[119] The systematic and widespread use of internet shutdowns in Myanmar illustrates how authoritarian regimes can weaponize digital blackouts during periods of intense conflict and instability.

Other conflict zones, such as Ethiopia, Syria, and Pakistan, have also witnessed internet shutdowns implemented during times of conflict or political unrest.[81] These cases, along with the experiences of Kashmir and Myanmar, reveal both similarities and differences when compared to the situation in Manipur. In many instances, the government's stated rationale for the shutdowns revolves around maintaining order and preventing the spread of misinformation, mirroring the justifications provided by the authorities in Manipur. Similarly, concerns about the disproportionate impact of these shutdowns on human rights and essential services are common across these different contexts. However, the specific nature of the conflict, the political landscape, and the duration of the internet restrictions can vary significantly from one region to

another. While the underlying justifications for internet shutdowns in conflict zones may share common threads, the actual impacts and the effectiveness of such measures are heavily influenced by the unique local circumstances of each situation.

VIII.   Challenges to Internet Governance and Universal Access in Manipur

The situation in Manipur underscores the complex interplay between ethnic conflicts, pressing security concerns, and the fundamental principles of digital rights.[10] The ongoing ethnic strife has created an exceptionally challenging environment for ensuring both the security of the state and the digital freedoms of its citizens. The government's repeated reliance on internet shutdowns as a primary security measure raises profound questions about its long-term commitment to protecting these fundamental rights and its willingness to explore alternative, less restrictive approaches. Achieving a balanced strategy that effectively safeguards both security and digital rights remains a critical challenge for Manipur.

Addressing the persistent digital divide within Manipur and ensuring equitable access to the internet for all communities, particularly those residing in the remote and often underserved hill areas, represents another significant hurdle.[11] Universal access extends beyond mere infrastructural availability; it necessitates addressing existing socio-economic disparities and ensuring that internet services are affordable and accessible to all segments of the population. The digital divide in Manipur has the potential to exacerbate existing inequalities, further marginalizing already vulnerable communities and hindering their access to essential services, information, and opportunities for social and economic advancement.[11]

Building trust and fostering meaningful dialogue between the diverse communities within Manipur and the state government is paramount for creating a conducive environment for inclusive and responsible internet governance.[15] The deep-seated lack of trust, stemming from historical grievances and perceptions of bias, makes it exceedingly difficult to implement fair and equitable policies related to internet access and governance. Establishing open channels of communication and actively engaging with all stakeholders are essential steps towards bridging this divide and fostering a more collaborative approach.

Exploring and implementing alternative measures for addressing legitimate security concerns and preventing the spread of misinformation and harmful content online, measures that are less restrictive of fundamental digital rights, is also a critical challenge.[52] Rather than resorting to complete internet shutdowns, which have far-reaching negative consequences, the government could focus on more targeted interventions. These might include addressing specific instances of hate speech or misinformation through content moderation, promoting media and digital literacy among the population, and enhancing cybersecurity measures to counter malicious activities. Such approaches could potentially be more effective in achieving the desired outcomes while

minimizing the detrimental impact on the rights and daily lives of ordinary citizens.

Civil society organizations, human rights groups, and international bodies have a crucial role to play in advocating for digital rights and promoting responsible internet governance in Manipur.[18] Their continued engagement, monitoring, and advocacy can help to ensure greater transparency and accountability in the government's actions and to push for policies that prioritize both security and fundamental rights in the digital sphere.

IX.   Conclusion

The digital rights crisis in Manipur, unfolding against the backdrop of a deeply troubling ethnic conflict and marked by an exceptionally prolonged internet shutdown, presents a stark illustration of the complex challenges that arise at the intersection of technology, human rights, and political instability. The extended digital blockade, while ostensibly aimed at maintaining order and preventing the spread of misinformation, has had a devastating and multifaceted impact on the lives and livelihoods of the people of Manipur. It has severely disrupted essential services such as education and healthcare, crippled local businesses, and fundamentally curtailed the rights to freedom of expression and access to information for a significant period. The situation in Manipur underscores the critical need for a more nuanced and rights-respecting approach to internet governance, particularly in conflict-affected regions globally. The government's reliance on blanket internet shutdowns as a primary security measure raises serious concerns about the proportionality and effectiveness of such actions, especially in light of their profound negative consequences on fundamental freedoms and the overall socio-economic well-being of the population.

The experiences of Manipur, when compared with similar situations in other conflict zones like Kashmir and Myanmar, highlight both the common threads and the unique characteristics of digital rights crises in volatile environments. While governments often cite similar justifications for imposing internet shutdowns, the long-term impacts and the effectiveness of these measures can vary considerably depending on the specific context. The case of Manipur serves as a powerful reminder of the urgent need for policy interventions that prioritize both security and the protection of fundamental rights in the digital age. This requires fostering trust and dialogue between communities and the government, addressing the underlying causes of conflict, exploring less restrictive alternatives to blanket shutdowns, and ensuring greater transparency and accountability in internet governance decisions. Future research should focus on developing effective strategies for balancing security concerns with the imperative of upholding digital rights in conflict zones, with the ultimate goal of preventing similar crises and promoting a more inclusive and rights-respecting digital future for all.

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