IT for Change

National Gender Fellowship 2024

Offline and Left Behind: Digital Exclusion, Gender and the Governance Crisis in the Manipur Conflict

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About the National Gender Fellowship

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About the Author

Jacqueline Chochoi is a researcher from Lamka, Manipur, with a bachelors degree in Journalism, International Relations, and Public Policy from St. Joseph's University, Bengaluru. Her writings have appeared in Raiot, The Quint and EastMojo, and she is among the recipients of the Zubaan–SPF Young Researchers Grant (2023–24). Her work draws on an intersectional feminist framework to examine conflict, the digital economy, and the politics of internet restrictions; particularly how these dynamics deepen divides across gender and ethnic lines.

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Abstract

The ethnic conflict that began on 3 May 2023 turned Lamka, a Kuki-Zomi hill town in Manipur, India, into a laboratory of enforced disconnection. Internet shutdowns, damaged power lines, and blocked trade routes rewrote everyday life in a landscape already marked by hill–valley inequality and longstanding state neglect. This study examines how digital and energy blackouts, framed as security measures, converge to disrupt livelihoods, relief networks, and disproportionately endanger women. Drawing on in-depth interviews with micro-enterprise owners, workers, and humanitarian actors, supported by extensive secondary reading on digital exclusion and conflict-zone governance, the study traces how shutdowns reshaped markets, relief camps, and emergent sites such as makeshift internet "cafés" in Internet Service Provider (ISPs) homes and hilltops where residents went to "fetch" network.

Findings reveal that the promises of Digital India and Digital North East 2022 rested on infrastructures built unevenly and withdrawn selectively. Women who sustained small businesses and relief efforts lost income, coordination channels, and protective community ties overnight. Even when connectivity did return, it did without safeguards as videos of sexual violence against Kuki-Zomi women circulated across platforms. Lamka's digitally dark zone emerges as a structural, gendered violence: a mode of rule in which electricity and connectivity turn on ethnicity, geography, and power, and in which a woman's ability to connect becomes inseparable from her ability to work, remain safe, and assert dignity.

Keywords:

Conflict Governance, Connectivity, Digital Exclusion, Energy Blackouts, Micro-enterprises, Violence Against Women, Digital blackouts, Internet Shutdowns.

Introduction

Background and Context

In 2023, the Indian state of Manipur entered one of the darkest chapters in the history of its statehood, as it witnessed the brutality of a never-ending conflict between the dominant Meitei community and the minority Kuki-Zomi community. Although the scale of the ongoing violence was unprecedented, the catastrophe unveiled a grim history of unaddressed grievances, unequal share of resources, uneven political representation, and a vacuum of neutral leadership in Manipur during the last decade. More than two years have passed since the conflict, which recorded 260 casualties (unofficial counts are deemed to be much higher) and displaced more than 70,000 of its population (Karmakar, 2024; Sphere India, 2023). According to a report published by Top10VPN (Migliano, 2025), the state of Manipur underwent the longest cyber blackout worldwide for the year 2023. There were 44 major internet shutdowns imposed in Manipur, totalling more than 5,000 hours and over 200 days, with orders to switch off access to all broadband and mobile networks.

These internet shutdowns, which were introduced to curb misinformation and control disorder, induced a more pervasive and intangible form of violence. The report by Top10VPN (2023) added that internet shutdowns in India that year delivered a blow to the economy, with an estimated loss of $585.4 thousand (approximately INR 4,858 crore). In Manipur, this impact fell heaviest on those already struggling—gig workers, daily wage earners, and small business owners operating on the margins of society. As thousands found their livelihoods uprooted, even the most basic services became inaccessible. The ripples of the conflict were most felt by those at the bottom. As gender-related crimes were on the rise during this period, the shutdowns made it impossible for people to report or receive crucial safety information and support. Jayshree Bajoria, Associate Director at Human Rights Watch, explained in a feature by Rina Chandran (2023), “The shutdowns also have an adverse impact on women’s ability to feel safe and restrict their freedom of movement, it took a horrific video of violence against women in Manipur to emerge on social media for the authorities to take action. This shows how necessary the internet is for the flow of information, and reporting and documenting abuses.”

This paper examines how the prolonged internet shutdowns in Manipur intersect with state failure, gendered violence, and infrastructural exclusion, particularly for the tribal Kuki-Zomi communities in Lamka district. It focuses on how the digital blackout resulted in forms of disconnection that reshaped economic survival, access to services, and women’s safety. By centering the lived experiences of affected women and small business owners in Lamka, Churachandpur, the study reveals how digital exclusion becomes a form of structural violence in times of conflict. The Hill district of Lamka, also known as Churachandpur, forms the core of this study and the primary site of fieldwork. Since the onset of the conflict, it has been physically and digitally cut off from the rest of Manipur.

The faces of division

The tribal minorities in Manipur have long faced systemic exclusion by the state that manifests in social, political, and economic marginalization. A persistent expression of this marginalization is the deep-rooted hill-valley divide, where development, governance, and resources are concentrated in the Imphal Valley, to the disadvantage of the surrounding tribal hill districts (Ziipao, 2020; Roluahpuia, 2017). The hill districts in Manipur have historically been denied equal access to infrastructure such as roads, healthcare, education, and telecommunications, resulting in a geography of neglect. As Ziipao (2020) argues, the state itself becomes a vehicle of exclusion, determining where and for whom development happens. This imbalance is compounded by the centralization of governance in Imphal, with most state institutions, services, and digital infrastructure concentrated in the valley (Roluahpuia, 2017). The current conflict itself can be traced to long-standing grievances, most recently inflamed by Meitei demands for Scheduled Tribe status (ST); a move perceived by tribal groups as a strategy to consolidate control over resources and institutional power. Tribal groups long feared that granting ST status to the Meiteis, who already benefit from Other Backward Classes (OBC), Scheduled Castes (SC), and Economically Backward Classes (EBC) reservations, would not only allow them to usurp reservation from all reserved categories but also enable them to purchase land in constitutionally protected hill areas under Article 371C of the Indian Constitution, threatening tribal autonomy and land rights in a state where they already dominate the legislative assembly.

In Lamka, a predominantly Kuki-Zomi tribal district, this marginalization was more pronounced during the 2023 ethnic conflict. Extended internet shutdowns and targeted destruction of electricity infrastructure left the town in digital and literal darkness. With no connectivity, the locals lost access to essential services, businesses were forced to close, prices soared, and remote workers were cut off from their livelihoods. Despite policies like Digital India (2015) and Digital Northeast (2022), the digital divide remains stark. Digital India was launched with three key vision areas: providing digital infrastructure as a utility to every citizen, delivering governance and services on demand, and digitally empowering citizens. Similarly, Digital Northeast 2022 aimed to ensure high-speed broadband to all local bodies, provide mobile connectivity to every uncovered village, better access to health and education through digital technology, digital skill development for youth, and to promote local entrepreneurs—especially women, alongside the promise of cloud-based disaster recovery centres. The vision document also emphasized digital infrastructure as a core utility, positioning it as foundational to inclusive development in the region with key components like the use of GIS mapping to support development planning and resource allocation; solar-powered energy solutions like Solar Cells and LED to ensure uninterrupted digital access even in power-deficient areas; and finally ubiquitous high-speed internet connectivity through a combination of fibre optics, wireless, and satellite technologies. These measures were intended to bridge infrastructural gaps and bring even the most remote areas into the digital fold. These policies, while promoting national e-governance and connectivity, have failed to account for the realities of conflict-affected tribal regions. In the real world, towns like Lamka get left behind, excluded from both development and the digital future promised by the state.

Recent literature on digital exclusion and internet shutdowns in India reveals a deepening dichotomy in experiences of digital citizenship. Grover (2023) theorizes how India's paradoxical investment in both digital connectivity (via Digital India) and dysconnectivity (via frequent internet shutdowns) is shaping a contingent and precarious form of citizenship. Through the concept of m-governance, Grover shows how mobile internet access has become a central mode through which the state governs and also disciplines its populations. Shutdowns, particularly those disproportionately imposed on peripheral regions like Kashmir and the Northeast, are not just disruptions to communication but mechanisms of political control, producing "digital subjects" who are denied full access to rights, services, and civic participation.

Similarly, the Internet Society emphasizes the economic and social costs of shutdowns, noting that such disruptions harm national economies, hinder emergency response systems, and break public trust in the reliability of infrastructure. These policies are said to create disincentives for digital investment, undermine e-governance efforts, and disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, especially where state services depend on digital mediation.

The existing literature, while robust in examining political rights, governance regimes, and state rationales for shutdowns, has paid little attention to how intersecting vulnerabilities of gender, ethnicity, geography, and conflict intensify the impacts of digital exclusion, particularly in the Indian Northeast. Most analyses focus on macro-political motivations for shutdowns or on Kashmir as a primary case, often omitting gendered experiences or the economic and care burdens placed on women during such disruptions.

Furthermore, there is a tendency to generalize digital exclusion either as a result of infrastructure deficits or shutdowns, without adequately differentiating between the two or analyzing how they build upon one another in conflict-afflicted areas. As Grover (2023) suggests, infrastructural precarity creates conditions for "predatory connectivity", where the promise of digital inclusion is weaponized by the state through intermittent or strategic disconnection.

It is within this landscape of forced isolation, structural neglect, and historical marginalization that this paper anchors its inquiry. The effects of digital exclusion and infrastructural failure, especially on tribal women in Lamka, have not yet been systematically studied, and this paper seeks to fill that gap. Specifically, this study explores how prolonged internet shutdowns and infrastructural collapse reshaped access to livelihoods, safety, and essential services. It investigates how these disruptions impacted women-led businesses, everyday communication, and digital governance efforts in a conflict-affected town of Manipur. In this context, the paper explores four interlinked questions:

1. How has digital exclusion impacted tribal women's access to essential services, information, and support systems during the Manipur conflict?
2. To what extent have digital governance initiatives like Digital India and Digital Northeast addressed these challenges?

3. How has the digital divide exacerbated vulnerabilities, particularly gendered and economic ones, in conflict-affected zones?
4. What metaphorical and material barriers have emerged as traditional trade and communication routes collapsed

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, gathering qualitative data through in-depth interviews with purposive sampling, while quantitative data was gathered from surveys. This approach allowed for a nuanced examination of how gender, ethnicity, conflict, class, and geography interconnect to shape experiences in digital exclusion.

Data Collection

Most primary fieldwork was conducted in Lamka, Churachandpur, a hill district in southern Manipur nestled in the Tuitha River Basin and surrounding hillocks, which is home to the Kuki-Zomi indigenous tribes and has historically functioned as the region's economic and social hub. This location was selected due to its centrality in the conflict and its prolonged experience of digital and infrastructural exclusion. The economy of Lamka is built on the backs of many minuscule indigenous networks across the state. These intricate and dependent trade systems between the hills and valleys districts are rendered vulnerable during times of crisis, as their structures operate on thin margins and rely on digital connectivity, national highways, and organic customer and supply chains. While programs like Digital Northeast 2022 aim to project the region as India's third digital gateway, they have neither addressed the infrastructure gaps (like optical fibre delays, limited village coverage, and network tower inefficiency) nor the compounded vulnerabilities in conflict-hit areas.

For primary data, I conducted in-depth interviews with heads of 25 Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), of which 20 were women-led. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, with an interview guide developed to ensure consistency, but also allowed for open-ended discussion beyond the predetermined questions. These interviews helped understand the impact of digital exclusion on local economic operations and informal networks, to trace how traditional systems of trade and commerce were disrupted, and to explore the reconfiguration of livelihood strategies in a post-conflict setting. Participants were also asked about their access to digital financial services and platforms. The criteria for this were based on their location in Lamka's main market area for contextual consistency. A preference was given to women-led enterprises due to the gendered focus of the paper, and though the selection was not restrictive, acknowledging that many medium-to-large enterprises were male-owned. Enterprises were chosen to represent a diversity of scale, such as micro, small, and medium, so as to understand how businesses of different sizes interacted with or were excluded from digital infrastructures. The sample also included both local residents and internally displaced persons (IDPs), to reflect a wide range of conflict-related experiences.

To further capture insights on digital policies and their reach, I conducted a structured survey across rural areas of Singngat, Hiangtam, and Sialna. These villages were selected for their accessibility and stronger connection to Lamka, functioning as semi-urban rural nodes. The survey aimed to examine the reach of Digital India and Digital Northeast 2022 policies, household access/connectivity to internet and electricity, digital literacy levels, and device ownership. While connectivity was relatively uniform for all due to shared power lines, smartphone ownership (which is often correlated with income) was a key differentiator across households.

A review of secondary sources, including academic papers, policy documents, news articles, and civil society reports, was conducted to contextualize field findings. These materials informed broader themes of digital divide and exclusion in conflict settings, gender dimensions of digital exclusion, internet as a tool of political inclusion/exclusion, digital governance policies in Northeast India, and the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and geography in digital access.

Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was also employed to explore experiences of digital exclusion in relation to work, education, discrimination, and access. The sample included 7 individuals from non-profit and development sectors, journalists, and students, all of whom were women. These participants had relied on digital platforms for work or safety and had experienced disruptions due to the internet shutdown. Their narratives provided critical insight into how digital exclusion affected privacy, remote work, and educational access during the conflict. To maintain ethical standards and protect participants' privacy, some names have been changed upon request. These pseudonyms are marked with an asterisk (*) to indicate altered identities and preserve the confidentiality of individuals who participated in this study, while ensuring the integrity of the research findings.

Findings

Lamka: The Case of a Digitally Dark Zone

Lamka, the principal town of Churachandpur district, once a vital trade and transit hub, became a chaotic chorus for news and media houses across India and a digitally dark zone since the onset of the conflict. For one, the local population had already experienced life in the dark as the state government failed to deliver the Khuga Dam hydro-project, which offered a promise of electrification for the district. The project, whose construction began sometime in 1983, was paused only to resume in 2002 and was completed in 2010. As Larlemdik et. al. (2021) argue, the Khuga Dam remains non-functional years after its construction, failing to meet its original goals and disproportionately impacting local indigenous women. Today, the dam remains resembling nothing more than massive blocks of concrete. The local population's acquaintance with electricity was a rare interaction that occurred twice a week for two to three hours. In 2014, Manipur implemented the 24x7 Power For All (PFA) programme, where the Manipur State Power Distribution Company Limited (MSPDCL) set up prepaid meters across all valley districts and hill-district headquarters. Since then, Lamka town dwellers could avail prepaid electricity, but the peripheral rural areas continued without a regulated supply. Even though electricity, like elsewhere in India, is indispensable, many households within the town area forewent these prepaid meters due to the exorbitant fees. Electricity represented a possibility for Manipur, and its versatile form was crucial for everything from household chores and water supply to industries, cellular networks, and internet connectivity. Without reliable electrification, every other development and connectivity remains a far-fetched dream for hill districts in Manipur.

In my survey covering 50 households across Singngat, Hiangtam, and Sialna, only 12 households in Singngat had access to prepaid electricity metering systems, while Hiangtam and Sialna had none. This uneven access reflects a broader pattern of infrastructural neglect, where even semi-urban villages like Singngat remain on the margins. Notably, none of the surveyed households across the three villages had heard of Digital India or Digital Northeast—both Government of India's flagship initiatives for digital transformation. Out of the 50 households surveyed, only 19 reported having any means of accessing the internet, primarily through smartphones using mobile data. The remaining 31 households lacked internet access, largely due to a combination of factors: poor mobile network coverage during unfavorable weather, the inability to afford regular data plans, and unreliable electricity supply that made even basic connectivity difficult to sustain. Previous studies have shown associations between geography, infrastructure, and digital exclusion. Graham and Dittus (2022) argued that information has always had geography–meaning that access to digital tools and the internet is enabled or constrained by where people live and the infrastructures available to them. This is consistent with Elwood and Leszczynski's (2013) view that instances of inequality or absence in digital connectivity are revealing and inseparable from the social contexts of such places. In places where infrastructure is absent or unreliable, exclusion becomes normalized. Ziipao (2020) terms this pattern "infrastructure injustice," describing how "development/infrastructure" projects in Manipur systematically often exclude the tribal hill areas and are deeply rooted in injustice. These studies indicate that geography and infrastructural neglect are critical in determining who gets connected/disconnected to digital resources.

The events of 3 May 2023 marked a turning point in Manipur's recent history. On that day, a tribal solidarity march organized by student bodies in the hill districts opposing the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status was met with violent backlash. What began as a peaceful demonstration quickly escalated into ethnic clashes, with widespread targeted violence against the Kuki-Zomi tribal communities in Imphal. In the days that followed, the state's social fabric began to unravel. Communities were torn apart, government authority weakened under allegations of bias and inaction, and critical infrastructure, both physical and digital, began to collapse.

The ethnic violence that erupted in the aftermath of the tribal solidarity march held by tribal student organizations opposing the Meitei's demand for ST status led to communal clashes and a series of targeted violence against the minority Zo populace in the state's capital, Imphal. The strife between the two communities led to displacement, targeted killings, and brutal acts of violence, including gender-based violence (GBV). The state government's authority thus deteriorated, from the unresponsiveness of law enforcement to allegations of complicity and inability to contain the violence. The internet shutdown was the last straw that severely disrupted relief efforts and social coordination. In a digital era, where relationships and resources depend on online presence, the internet is a lifeline in times of crisis or disasters, as it provides access to breaking news and other critical information or helpline services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, effective internet use played a significant role in enabling access to information, supporting timely interventions to reduce the spread, and enhancing the protective behaviours of the public (Zhang, Q et al., 2022). However, during the 2023 conflict, people were forced to go without the internet at a time when they were most in need of it. MN (2023) reported that from 04 May 2023 the Indian government did what it has done repeatedly when faced with internal conflict—it shut off the internet. The central government, which had the power to order telecom providers to stop providing fixed-line and mobile internet, banned both in Manipur using an emergency law. This was part of a broader pattern where shutdowns were routinely used to control public unrest, as seen in Kashmir in 2022 and again during the Manipur conflict in 2023. (Access Now, 2022; Access Now, 2023). Between 2015 and 2019 alone, the state of Manipur recorded at least five shutdowns, and in 2023, it witnessed India's longest internet shutdown of nearly 200 days, as documented by internet shutdowns (2023), followed by 11 more shutdowns in 2024 (Newslaundry, 2025). The immediate blackout was thus a recurring as well as an escalating pattern of how the government attempted to solve conflict, by severing communication when people most needed access to information—arrange travel, set up helplines, and receive news from loved ones. Madapathi (2024) and Chinmayi and Lakshané (2018) have shown that internet shutdowns are not only recurring but increasingly used by authorities as crisis-management tools, often severing vital communication channels when people most need access to information, helplines, or loved ones.

Thiem (33) vividly recalled the incidents of 3rd May 2023, "We were forced to leave our homes in Imphal; the only safe space for us in the city was the army centres. They were so overcrowded, every tribal (Kuki-Zomi) person you knew in Imphal was there...it was the only place we were protected. At the time, our sole comfort was talking to our family and relatives outside of the state", she added, "but even that little connection we had was gone. They [the Government] banned the internet immediately."

She continued:

> "We were lucky to have had relatives in Delhi who did what was needed [arranged their flight tickets], but many did not have contacts in other states and had to stay back in the army camps for many days watching others leave. No one was coming for them. It was so difficult being in that situation... without the internet, those stuck in Imphal had no ability to access websites or apps to book tickets, nor transfer money. The chance of being rescued for them was thin, and the desperation in the entire camp felt by all, as people hovered around, hoping for word-of-mouth news or help from someone who had contacts to book their tickets from outside Manipur."

In the following weeks, the internet shutdown was imposed throughout the state. Though authorities claimed such measures were necessary to 'preserve peace' (Nazmi, 2019) and prevent misinformation, in reality, they have had the opposite effect. First, the shutdown itself was biased in nature, and the internet ban was selectively lifted in parts of Imphal, giving the Meitei majority significant control over information disseminated in the media. Sitlhou, M. (2023b) reported that "vast amounts of disinformation have emerged from the Manipur crisis not only because of an internet ban but due to its uneven nature: it has offered privileged access to businesses and media close to power, mostly in the valley. Dedicated internet services remained selectively available to particular businesses in the valley and government offices, with the approval of the home department."

Meanwhile, in the hills, the internet restriction was firmly in place, making it nearly impossible to report the atrocities people faced, particularly gender-based violence. Visiting journalists were monitored and restricted by the state, with limited internet access and pressure to avoid reporting on Meitei violence. Afrida Hussain, a reporter for India Today NE, was barred from photographing Meitei extremists burning Kuki-Zo homes in Sugnu. When she returned to Imphal for internet access, she received multiple threatening phone calls warning her about 'consequences' and later found that her hotel room was surrounded by agitated mobs questioning what she had been reporting from the ground. As she reflected, "no one questioned me when I covered Kuki militants, but one thing against the majority community got me into trouble" (Hussain, 2023). According to Rajpurohit (2023), Hussain's original article, published on 29 May, was deleted after facing online backlash from members of the Meitei community and was republished only after she left the state, on 3 May.

M. Sitlhou (2023a) also notes how an editor from the Ukhrul Times clarified that "The internet shutdown was "not 100%," but only some accredited media houses in the Meitei-dominated valley had secured access from the government, the access points for hill-based news outlets are very few, and with limited resources, it has made news scarce. ... Ukhrul Times is the only exception because we have an informal satellite desk in Delhi." In a fact-finding report, the Editors Guild of India (2023) observed that the internet shutdown imposed on May 4 had a "dramatic impact on reporting," ultimately helping construct a majoritarian narrative.

Since Imphal hosts all eight newspapers in the state, along with the most-watched digital broadcast media like TOM TV and Impact TV, the flow of information was largely controlled from the valley. As the report noted, this resulted in a narrative that increasingly blamed "those who did not have a voice in this conflict.

During the initial stage of the conflict, television news and reportage from significant media houses did not sit well with those affected by the conflict. The headlines were misleading and often portrayed the situation as an illegal immigration problem and a drug war. This propaganda was actively reinforced by the state's Chief Minister, N.Biren Singh, who on November 10, 2023, posted on his official Facebook page, urging the public to "see and think about the seriousness of illegal immigrants in Manipur from neighbouring Myanmar and other countries." He further emphasized, in Meitei, that this was part of his "War on Drugs" campaign. Similarly, in a report by India Today, Kaushik Deka (2023) noted that the Chief Minister directly linked Myanmar immigrants to deforestation, poppy cultivation, and the drug menace in the state. Singh even formed a cabinet sub-committee to identify and deport these "illegal immigrants", reinforcing the state's official stance on the conflict as a border and narcotics issue. Only when independent journalists crossed over the buffer lines into hill districts did accurate reportage and ground realities emerge online. In a message posted on X (formerly Twitter), journalist Gareeshma Kuthar (13 June 2023) shared that "There was no network from day before night and all day at Saikul yesterday. Still there is no network (Jio, Airtel) i had to travel out for more than an hour to make a proper call. On Manipur TV channels which is the only source of information, it's ridiculous how the lies are."

Chinmayi S.K., a digital rights researcher, highlighted that the internet ban disproportionately affected Kuki tribal communities. "For the [Kuki] tribals," she explained, "it reduced their voice and allowed for them to be misrepresented, which obviously led to a misunderstanding of their viewpoints, and what injustices they may have faced due to the shutdown" (qtd. Sitlhou, 2023a). Many of the interventions against gender-based crimes came too late, as human rights groups on the ground were unable to document incidents in real time. The internet shutdown severely hampered the collection of evidence, which often included survivor testimonies, photographs, videos, and geolocated data. Without connectivity, this crucial documentation could not be securely transmitted to legal teams, journalists, or allied networks outside the state who could help verify, publicise, and escalate the cases. In a context where local institutions were either compromised or inaccessible, forwarding this digital evidence beyond Manipur was necessary to mobilize national and international pressure for justice. When internet technology is implemented in a way that benefits certain groups while neglecting others, it reveals underlying patterns of systemic bias. One such pattern is what Weidmann (2016) terms "ethnic favoritism", that politically excluded groups suffer from significantly lower internet penetration rates compared with those in power. Weidmann's study also demonstrates that this digital disparity cannot be explained by economic or geographic factors alone. The definition is most befitting for how the Manipur state government strategically opened access in parts of Imphal while imposing an extensive internet ban on the hill districts.

But then, Lamka experienced a more insidious form of exclusion due to the deliberate destruction of the district's power lines, further exaggerating the existing vulnerabilities to connectivity, livelihood, safety, and information. As reported by NewsClick, groups like the Meira Paibi and Arambai Tenggol allegedly cut off all supply lines to Churachandpur, effectively plunging the area into darkness (Chakraborty, 2024). An official of the MSPDCL explained to me that of the three power lines serving the connected districts of Churachandpur and Pherzawl, two—the 33KV and 132KV lines in Meitei-inhabited Moirang and Ningthoukhong, were destroyed by Meitei extremists in June 2023. And the remaining line had also been reportedly sabotaged on two previous occasions. The Hills Journal (2024) also noted that even when the MSPDCL dispatched a team from Imphal to repair the damaged lines, they were denied entry by both the Border Security Force and state forces stationed in the area. For many weeks, the residents of Lamka were plunged into complete darkness, as crucial services ceased to operate, from water supply to education and healthcare equipment. A healthcare worker from Churachandpur district hospital revealed in an interview that the hospital had to rely entirely on diesel generators to keep critical functions running during the outage. In a report by Ali (2024) for The Wire, a member of the Kuki Students' Organisation confirmed that surgeries at Churachandpur Medical Hospital were severely disrupted, with 35 deaths reported due to the lack of proper treatment facilities and supplies. Again, this power blackout was not just an isolated incident but recurred many times, and was consistently reported by Lamka residents from June 2023 to early February 2024. The repair took weeks, during which the substantial damage only caused more incidents of blackouts. The pattern of blackouts coincided with the internet shutdowns as well, crippling mobile network towers and causing periods of total disconnection, where phone calls, SMS, and the internet all ceased to work. As one member of the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum described, "It feels like we are going back to the 1970s. No lights, no network, no internet."

These consequences of these breakdowns went far beyond connectivity as it reshaped the very economics of survival. The local markets were severely disrupted as the disconnection was followed by disruptions (blockades and curfews), thus collapsing the long-established trade and supply networks. In May 2024, Rural Manipur recorded the highest inflation rate in the country, peaking at 12.32%, according to the Economic Survey (2023–2024), as reported by Outlook Money. Much of the loss incurred for these small businesses/enterprises also went unaccounted for due to the informal nature of their work. In the absence of online tools and platforms, many MSMEs were forced to reconfigure how they sourced and sold goods. When asked whether they had to change the lines of supply for their business, 90% of the respondents reported changing the source from which they could acquire goods for selling. Before, the supply would arrive in Lamka from Imphal (61.8 km) via the NH-2 Highway. Now, the goods reach Lamka from Aizawl via the NH-102B, which covers 360 km. James, who runs a convenience store, said that the prices of goods have skyrocketed by as much as 125%. He explained how many more people and processes were involved for goods to reach Lamka from outside Manipur.

> "For example, the cost is usually standard when buying a product from anywhere in India, which is shipped to Aizawl at a low rate when ordered in bulk. Nevertheless, the real challenge starts from Aizawl as extra labour is needed to load the goods onto courier trucks and transport them to Lamka, which is extremely expensive at about ₹300 per kilogram."The new supply pattern follows a centralized route through Aizawl, creating a bottleneck that significantly increases operational costs. Accounts for all the labor, road taxes, and transportation frequently exceed the value of the goods being transported, making the selling of goods in Lamka cost way more than before.

Jama, another grocery store owner, commented, "I have lost count of how many times I have had to throw out frozen food. With the regular blackouts, the food spoils...and it's money down the drain. Moreover, these *mahajons* keep hiking up prices. What choice do we have? They're the only ones with reliable supplies now." For many small shop owners, supplies are better acquired directly from the mahajons rather than from Aizawl. *Mahajon* refers to influential wholesalers or large-scale traders who control the supply chain of essential goods in Manipur. These individuals, often non-local businessmen, have long dominated the market by acting as intermediaries to suppliers outside the state. Due to their stronghold over distribution, they dictate market prices and sometimes inflate costs due to factors like labor, economic blockade, and transportation. The collapse of connectivity from the internet to highways comes to be more than a logistical concern for the locals in Lamka as it also exposed digital inequalities and intermediary dependencies. Connectivity is redefined not only through bandwidth and roads, but also through power and access in the shifting of its market systems.

The Vulnerability of Dependence

Bajoria (2023) argues that internet access is essential not only for freedom of expression and association but also for ensuring key economic and social rights. As governments digitize social security systems, internet access becomes increasingly critical for realizing rights to education, health, work, food, and social security. In Lamka, the dependence on the internet caused stagnation in livelihoods because, in the absence of reliable power or the internet, work and pay cease to exist.

Liani (45) runs a beauty salon in a busy market area of New Lamka. Scrolling through her now-quiet phone, she revealed, "I built my whole network through WhatsApp and Instagram". Taking us through the list of services offered, she explained:

> "When the internet went down, that all disappeared. I can't use half my tools without power, so 50% of my services are gone. Even now, it's mostly just a few clients that come. Beauty and maintenance have become a luxury, but this is my livelihood, you know?"

It is noteworthy that many of the commercial centres and shops in Lamka are nestled in dingy old buildings where network penetrations are severely low and without any power backup. In 2021, the Better Than Cash Alliance and the Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology reported that "the North-East Region is most likely to experience online transaction failure rates at 1.5–2x the national average due to 3x higher network downtime and 50% slower internet speeds compared to other regions of the country." Lamka's case is not a rejection of digital governance, but a cautionary advice that digital transformation cannot overwrite material precarity. That digital access will never be equal; not when power is unpredictable, and phone signals stay intermittent. This is most evident for Nancy, who runs a sportswear showroom in Zenhang Lamka. She told us that before the *buai* (local term for conflict), things were much different. She said, "My sister in Delhi would source the stuff and send it through air cargo. Expenses were minimal compared to now, so we could even offer discounts." Gesturing at the empty shop, she added, "Hardly anyone comes in now. Can't blame them, who's thinking about leisure or sportswear when it's a struggle to even buy the essentials? Customers can't even see what we're selling when there's no power. And the phone network is very bad here, and digital payments fail almost every time." One common concern amongst the interviewees was about failed transactions, not because of internet restrictions, but due to network shortages. The limitations of digital payments (G-Pay, Paytm, PhonePe) are due to blank connectivity spots. During the conflict, the few ATMs in town were also dysfunctional, creating severe cash shortages that affected the economy altogether.

Jemi, who runs a stationery shop in New Lamka mentioned that she sourced her supplies from online websites. She explained:

> "Even before the conflict, we always placed our orders online, and they'd arrive by courier. Deliveries came through from Imphal, and the fees were pretty reasonable. Now, the cost is more than double the product's price, and deliveries take ten times longer coming from Aizawl. During the shutdown, we had no way to place orders at all. People always need stationery for school and office work, you name it, but we ran out of so many things. At one point, we had no choice but to close the shop. After all, we can't keep the doors open if there's nothing left to sell."

Sustainable Directory (2025) emphasizes that the foundation of any successful digital bridge in conflict zones rests upon the resilience of its infrastructure. Furthermore, the power sources for these networks must be diverse and robust; solar power, wind energy, and even hand-cranked generators can provide backup power, ensuring continued connectivity even during widespread power outages. For Lamka, the tangible and metaphorical collapse go hand in hand, making the sweeping aims for e-governance schemes seem like a blueprint drawn for firmly established cities rather than for context-specific disruptions and conflict-afflictions faced in the North-East Region(NER). The mismatch isn't incidental but a structured one in India's ambitious self-placement as the world's third most digitized country.

Make-dos and Mendings of a Small-town Market

Some of the people I talked to shared how they had to rethink their business model, opting for sustainability over profit in order to survive. As supply routes became blocked or prohibitively expensive, Ngai, a garment seller, was also forced to pivot. She shared:

> "I had to shift from selling imported, brand-new apparel to selling second-hand clothes. Before we sourced our clothes from Dimapur. But the route is impossible now, and going through Aizawl, the costs would eat up all our profits. So, we switched to second-hand clothing as they can be sourced locally, right here in Lamka."

Ngai's shop once prided itself on keeping up with the latest trends with apparel sourced from Korea, China, and Thailand. But now the racks are brimming with clothes that are not as opulent but more accessible to the local shopper. While second-hand is a niche market with a small profit, Ngai explained that the shift was necessary as the cost of transporting goods had now become a heavy liability, and people would rather choose a safe bet than lose the little they have.

Although not an adaptive strategy in the conventional sense, few businesses have peculiarly endured the waves of blackouts and shutdowns without much interference, like the humble Singpi Hotel (local tea stall). "For us? Things haven't changed much, really," one hotel owner stated. "We serve about the same number of people every day. Internet problems and power cuts didn't affect us much, maybe because we're less acquainted with those methods or maybe because we never relied on them in the first place." In their Singpi Hotel, the only electrical appliance in use was a single light bulb, "We just need our bulb working," she added. The hotel thrives on just two items on the menu - tea and puri. "Getting supplies isn't too difficult; we buy our supplies wholesale, though prices are a bit higher now". The calibre of the Singpi Hotel can likely be attributed to its pioneering status as a homegrown enterprise model. It fulfils more than a commercial purpose; it is a community site that serves the local population's broader needs. While this integrated approach proves to be successful in the length of time and context, it's important to recognize that not all contemporary business models can feasibly adopt this form in today's rapidly evolving economic and digital landscape. At the same time, inflation and supply disruptions expose a dire need to develop self-sufficient industries and increase reliance on regional and artisanal products to reduce dependency on external networks.

The physical darkness, paired with the digital disconnection in Lamka, exemplified a case of how actors in conflict (extremist groups, government inaction) targeted the existing vulnerabilities (digital and energy infrastructure) to create a peculiar kind of isolation. In conflict settings, any form of digital exclusion comes intertwined with the loopholes of society, such as digital (internet) and physical infrastructure (electricity) to create a more pronounced disconnection. In a study on the marginality of the Hazara ethnic group, Chiovenda (2014) draws our attention to how energy poverty/exclusion is an indicator of marginalization by the state.

The Hazaras of Bamyan consider themselves to be the most disadvantaged and most oppressed group in Afghanistan, because they continue to live in a non-electrified zone even today. For them, the lack of electricity is a visible reminder of a playing field that, politically and economically, is not level. Likewise, this double dysconnectivity of internet and electricity has shaped how the residents of Lamka experience life in a digital world today. Digital governance policies have failed to address these problems and even exclude them from basic rights and protections. The fallout of Manipur's digital shutdown was far from neutral. As communities at large suffered immense disruption, women in particular bore the brunt of exclusion in losing access to safety networks, essential communication, and economic autonomy. Gendered vulnerabilities in digital spaces, especially during conflict, are amplified in regions already marked by marginality, like Lamka.

At the moment, Lamka's commerce reflects the will to persist, survive, and adapt. One shop vendor tells us how he gives credit to his customers, as fewer people are able to afford upfront payments. Like so, many businesses have informally adopted credit-based transactions with nothing but a register and pen, scribbling down reminders. Although this comes with risks such as delayed payments, growing debts, and the constant uncertainty of whether the money will come back, it also displays a living cultural tradition of the Kuki-Zomi tribes called 'Ki Ngai Nat Na' or 'Tlawmngaihna'. It is an untranslatable term that encompasses a selflessness and a community approach to relationships and even survival. The ethos is still relevant today as it reminds us how the permanence of the Zo tribes is dependent on community ties and long-standing relationships where support is a two-way process. In these trying times, the marketplace is no longer just about transactions but an ecosystem of mutual reliance where trust is as valuable as money. Unlike the digital economy, which privileges speed and isolated transactions, this model is resilient precisely because it depends on obligation, memory, and community. It is not that Lamka lacks enterprise or resilience. The markets have adapted, but not without cost; from rising middlemen to shifting business models and informal credit systems. But these are strategies borne out of necessity and exclusion, not empowerment.

Women Caught Between the Flicker of Exclusion and Restoration

> "If there was no internet shutdown, those videos would have surfaced over two months ago and the horror could have been addressed speedily, and other similar offences could have been curbed." — Patricia Mukhim, Editor of The Shillong Times (qtd. Chandran, R., July 2023)

Internet shutdowns disproportionately impact women by denying access to digital safety mechanisms, increasing dependence on male figures, and heightening exposure to gender-based violence. Studies across the Global South (Heeks, 2022), conflict zones (Access Now, 2023), and globally (United Nations Office to the African Union [UNOAU],2022) have shown that online spaces are both lifelines and battlegrounds for women.

In fragile and crisis-affected settings, digital access remains deeply gendered, limiting the participation and protection of women during humanitarian emergencies. Akhmatova and Akhmatova (2020) highlight that in regions like South Asia and India, women are significantly less likely than men to own mobile phones or access mobile internet. This gap most likely stems from patriarchal norms that limit women's autonomy over technology, as well as the specific vulnerabilities of displacement, such as restricted movement, lack of personal documentation, and heightened dependence on male guardians. As a result, displaced women are often more digitally excluded than both displaced men and non-displaced women, which critically undermines their ability to access help, receive emergency information, or assert their rights during crises.

Research has unveiled a disheartening reality that reflects the intersection of conflict and social media polarization, leading to gender-based violence amidst war. Ali et al. (2024) examine that in the case of the Northern Ethiopia War, platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) were actively weaponized, spreading ethnic hate speech, threats, and calls for revenge that intensified the violence, particularly against women. The study shows that "social media was used for fuelling conflict...aggravated the war" and "exacerbated gender-based violence, including the spread of ethnic hate speech, revenge, threats, and targeted attacks against ethnic groups" (Ali et al., 2024, p.4). In this case, it illustrates the destructive potential of unregulated digital spaces during conflict, and it also gestures toward the reasoning governments often present by restricting internet access—namely, to curb the dissemination of false information. However, in the case of Manipur, this logic breaks down in practice.

As Sitlhou (2023) reported, "many Kuki-Zomi women bore the brunt of online misinformation campaigns, and became victims of targeted violence and varied forms of sexual assault." Despite the false news being debunked by local authorities and media, they were used to justify brutal, retaliatory violence against Kuki-Zo women. By the time survivors and affected communities sought to report these attacks, document evidence, or counter the false narratives, the state had pulled the plug, and the internet was cut off. Comparatively, Sitlhou (2023) reported that in Manipur, "many Kuki-Zomi women bore the brunt of online misinformation campaigns, and became victims of targeted violence and varied forms of sexual assault". Misinformation, in this context, was spread via interpersonal networks, WhatsApp messages passed between phones offline, and word-of-mouth, making it more insidious and unverifiable. Poor media literacy allowed such fake news to persist, and neither mainstream nor independent media could counter it. In a cruel twist, the crimes against women went largely underreported due to the shutdowns and the absence of safe digital reporting mechanisms. Raghavan (2021) asserts that online gender-based violence profoundly impairs women's exercise of citizenship rights and democratic participation, creating a "credibility deficit" that silences them and limits their voices in public discourse (p. 8). As such, Faith (2021) contends that feminist digital justice must confront how the broader digital economy systematically disadvantages women—both by enabling online abuse on platforms that double as workplaces, and by failing to provide effective legal or reporting mechanisms.

The silencing of women online, whether through harassment, gaslighting, or platform inaction, is a form of economic injustice, as it forces women to withdraw from public and professional life. Here, the digital weaponization of social media not only contributed to the conflict's brutality but also silenced women, depriving them of both protection and platforms to report or resist.

In places of conflict or civil unrest, the Government has often justified internet shutdowns as necessary security measures, implemented with surgical precision through bureaucratic orders. Yet there is nothing prophylactic about their impacts. In Manipur, the decision to leave people disconnected warrants an investigation into how hardships fall unevenly through the ridges of society, with gender being a key determinant of who pays the highest price. Lian and Nanao* were caught by the mobs while fleeing their village in Manipur's Kangpokpi District. When they were brought to Lamka, Churachandpur, they reached out to a team of women activists who helped document their traumatic experience. In an interview with the team, one of the activists explained that their efforts to reach out to human rights networks were severely hampered. "Without images or some video proof, many people doubted and did not take action. They didn't understand the scale. Words had failed us". The two women recalled how they had seen the attackers film the assault on their phones—a tactic used to perpetuate humiliation and control. A few days after mobile data and Internet services were resumed, Lian and Nanao were at the market when the activists frantically searched for them and pulled them to the side. "They told us the video had surfaced online and immediately relocated us from the relief camps to a private house", Nanao* recounted, describing the details of the incident in an interview. The sudden restoration of internet connectivity after a prolonged shutdown created a digital storm. There were no safeguards, no content moderation systems, and no authorities prepared to manage the flood of disturbing content. The very shutdown that authorities had justified as a measure to "curb misinformation and control violence" had, in fact, silenced survivors like Lian and Nanao when they needed help most. And when the ban was finally lifted, the world that had remained deaf to their pleas was suddenly eager to consume the spectacle of their violation. The digital space became a site of re-traumatization and injustice, exposing the cruelty of a system that denies voice during suffering yet amplifies it in voyeurism.

Kim (33) opened an app on her phone to calculate time zones for a meeting she had scheduled that day. In these meetings, she thinks about the hundreds of families in displacement camps waiting for assistance and aid to help rebuild their lives. As a development worker, she had spent years building relationships that rely on constant communication. Prior to the shutdown, she managed multiple community projects through Zoom calls, progress and impact reports, evidence, etc, with her donors outside of the state. But internet shutdowns had severed these connections precisely when they were needed most. "We lost the very thing that was needed to intervene", she recalls. Kim soon discovered that while the whole of Lamka, Churachandpur, was disconnected, a handful of families maintained limited connectivity in their residences. These were the homes of Internet Service Providers (ISPs), who continued to receive uninterrupted service through satellite connections routed from cities like Guwahati.

As a result, they had become unofficial internet cafés during the shutdown. These homes were packed with men, Kim explained that when she explained her dire situation of needing to connect to their internet to update her funders, she was always asked to wait. The wait would stretch for hours, and she observed that others who came much after her would be ushered much ahead, as though their urgency was more legitimate than hers. “First, you’re fighting for internet access. Then, when you finally get it, you’re fighting for the right to be taken seriously in how you use that access,” she added. In these spaces, other remote workers (mostly men) were more readily recognized by the ISP owners and treated as legitimate netizens. Their presence and her exception of being the only woman in the room seemed to affirm the ‘norm’ of who belonged in the digital arena. It also hinted towards a larger truth: that in Lamka, there were far fewer women visible or acknowledged in tech-enabled or remote professional spaces. So little that even after showing up, people like Kim are compelled to justify their presence, their purpose, and their very right to be connected.

She admitted that her frustration was also aimed at her colleagues, as many lacked the ability to grasp how she was digitally isolated by no choice of hers. She told me, “They’d reply immediately, asking why I couldn’t join their video call scheduled earlier that day, if I somehow had internet access now.” It was Kim’s Non-governmental Organization (NGO) and her funders that enabled several programs to take root in the displacement camps across Lamka, Churachandpur. These camps, set up and managed by local organisations, emerged swiftly during the exodus of the Kuki-Zomi population from Imphal, offering refuge to thousands. Within them, displaced women gradually regained financial independence through employment programs, while children resumed their interrupted education. “They looked to me for solutions, but the shutdown barred and left me without any means to offer them aid”, she conveyed. Kim’s situation mirrors the impact of Sudan’s recent communications blackout (Sudan Tribune, 2025), which crippled women’s groups’ efforts to deliver financial aid, report abuse, and provide essential services like healthcare and education, and cut off lifelines for countless displaced women and children who depended on digital tools for survival and support.

The exclusion of women from peace and rehabilitation initiatives stems both from structural gender biases and digital exclusion. Sharma et al. (2021) illustrate how internet shutdowns in Myanmar severely disrupted access to life-saving information and services for women, undermining efforts to coordinate humanitarian responses and heightening their vulnerability to gender-based violence. Similarly, Ali et al. (2024) reveal how women were excluded from peacebuilding efforts due to socio-cultural norms, digital illiteracy, and the pervasive digital divide. For women humanitarian workers like Kim operating in a conflict zone, the immense barriers due to disrupted internet access, marginalization translate into real-world constraints of being unable to access digital coordination platforms, document rights violations, or participate in re-constructive dialogues.

Ching* (22) was preparing for entrance examinations. Unable to afford coaching classes, she relied on the internet to access study materials, video lessons, and sample tests. As one of her exams neared, another shutdown was imposed, which hindered her preparations.

Around Lamka, the locals had found loopholes to gain momentary access to the Internet. People would cross over a hilltop in Lungthul, a village situated 68 km from Lamka, to reach a spot where mobile signals from neighbouring states could be captured when combined with a VPN on the phone. Many people went to this spot to 'fetch internet'. "The journey was long, and I heard that a cousin's friend went there regularly, taking as many phones as possible for others as well to fetch the Internet. So, I entrusted him to download all the materials I needed and gave away the pass locks of my phone," she explained. Weeks later, Ching received messages from a friend that some of her private photos were circulating on WhatsApp groups. The person she had trusted her phone with had browsed her gallery as well and sent himself photos he found there. The incident disturbed her mentally, and she could no longer continue preparing for other upcoming exams. Had it not been for the internet restrictions, Ching would have had the liberty to pursue her career aspirations without compromising her privacy or preparation.

In patriarchal societies, digital vulnerability reinforces paternalistic control where women who face restrictions to information, economic independence, and agency also become more susceptible to privacy breaches. Similarly, in Kashmir (Sharma, 2023), internet shutdowns heighten women's dependence on male figures and hinder women's access to education and opportunities. Women face "double oppression"—one from societal norms and the other from state-enforced limitations. As personal accounts reveal, digital access in conflict zones is not a simple binary of connection or disconnection, but comes layered with questions of control, consent, and survival. Such state-imposed regulations are not gender-neutral interventions; rather, they interact with and fall within the existing social structures to further create hostility and insecurity for women and girls. Thus, technology becomes a double-edged sword, and when digital access is stripped of protective mechanisms, it creates other forms of violence. The right to connectivity is not just about access to information but about safety, agency, education, economic opportunity, and dignity. The vulnerability women face when being disconnected is one side of the coin. Conversely, more devastating consequences often follow when connectivity illuminates again.

In a report by Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN, 2025), Harira Wakili emphasises that in conflict-afflicted contexts, most women who are facing gender-based violence, rape, and sexual harassment are living in rural areas where there is no connectivity and no access to technology, and this results in severe underreporting. At the same time, this does not imply that they do not experience Technology-facilitated Gender Based Violence (TFGBV). In a world where everything is hyper visible digitally, the silence of these women's stories separates them from the rest of the world and from solidarity and resources, and allows violence to grow with impunity. Scholars working on online gender-based violence (OGBV) in conflict zones from Kashmir (Sharma, 2023) and Sudanese feminist researchers at Hopes and Actions Foundation(2023) echo the concern that the absence of connectivity does not equal safety, and its abrupt return without safeguards can become a site of renewed trauma.

Here, digital exclusion functions as a tool to control and limit women's ability to navigate a chronically online world. The sporadic manner of shutdowns in Manipur follows a distinct pattern where the internet, which should have been a channel for documentation, safety alerts, and solidarity, became a digital terrain where women's pain/violation was replayed and re-exploited. In this context, technology was transformed from a tool of empowerment to a weapon of exposure, exploitation, and exclusion.

Conclusion

While digital transformation programs like Digital India (2015) and Digital Northeast (2022) are framed as tools for progress, their selective implementation and lack of protective measures benefit only a fraction of the population. For those in conflict zones like Manipur, these initiatives, rather than bridging the gap, highlight the disconnect between state policies and ground realities. Prolonged internet shutdowns, combined with deliberate sabotage of power sources, deprived the Kuki-Zomi communities of essential services, economic opportunities, and fundamental rights. The Manipur conflict has redefined digital exclusion and shown that it is not an unfortunate consequence of conflict but a calculated move that deepened marginalization, particularly for tribal women. As Sharma (2023) and Access Now (2023) have highlighted, digital blackouts disproportionately affect women in conflict zones, stripping away autonomy, safety nets, and access to justice. The Manipur case exemplifies the "digital discrimination" described by Weidmann et al. (2016), where internet and communication infrastructures are manipulated to entrench existing ethnic and political hierarchies. Yassien (2023) highlights how socio-economic disparities in fragile and conflict-affected settings intersect with digital inequalities, often leaving marginalized populations, including women, excluded from digital economies and opportunities due to limited access, education, and infrastructure.

Bridging the digital divide in a conflict zone like Manipur is not merely about temporary access to technology; it requires sustainable solutions that ensure marginalized communities remain digitally resilient, even amid violent disruptions and infrastructure challenges. Achieving this demands long-term capacity building, investment in local indigenous expertise, and equipping communities with the skills, resources, and infrastructure needed to maintain their own digital systems. As Das (2022) argues, "The Northeast continues to suffer from a lack of meaningful and substantive connectivity projects that address its economic and social concerns. This cannot be resolved without a fundamental rethink of how India approaches and assesses connectivity initiatives. States often miss the point that connectivity is a means to a larger end, not the end itself. These projects are typically envisioned as agents of material and social development but lack any independent significance unless we ask: whom are we connecting, and for what purpose?"

The true measure of success in digital transformation is not in the launch of projects, but in their sustainability. Real digital inclusion can only happen when local communities are empowered through sustained capacity-building efforts that ensure equitable access, digital literacy, and long-term digital and infrastructure resilience. Digital Northeast 2022's intended goals of digital transformation, improving ease of living, and fostering inclusive growth remain unfulfilled in Manipur's conflict zones. Small businesses have collapsed under the weight of financial losses, workers have been cut off from their livelihoods, and women have found themselves more vulnerable than ever, unable to report crimes or seek timely help. The social fabric of the community has been further strained, with families struggling to stay connected, students losing access to education, and organizations unable to coordinate relief efforts.

At the national level, India's vision for a digital future, one that champions innovation and economic growth, stands in direct contradiction to its repeated internet shutdowns. With 51 shutdowns recorded in 2023 alone, India is on track to maintain its status as the global leader in digital blackouts. A nation cannot claim leadership in the digital economy while routinely severing access to it. The need for a rights-based, inclusive, and resilient digital policy has never been more urgent.

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