

Of Sieges and Shutdowns

How unreliable mobile networks and intentional Internet shutdowns affect the lives of women in Manipur

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Full Report: <http://thebachchaoproject.org/of-sieges-and-shutdowns>

This exploratory study draws upon 16 qualitative interviews and as many first-person accounts conducted in Manipur in late 2017. The 16 respondents were cisgender women between 20 and 60 years of age. All were natives of Manipur, belonging to different ethnic tribes and residing in the hill and valley districts of the state. (*More demographic information in Annex 6, Of Sieges and Shutdowns*).

Background

- Insurgency, armed conflict and political unrest
- Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) implemented in the state since 1980.
- Long-standing conflict between different ethnic groups.
- Third lowest per capita income in the country, and limited avenues for employment and economic growth.
- The rapid penetration of wireless Internet in Manipur since 2016, coupled with the availability of affordable mobile handsets in India has opened new avenues of business, income and education for entrepreneurs, professionals and students.

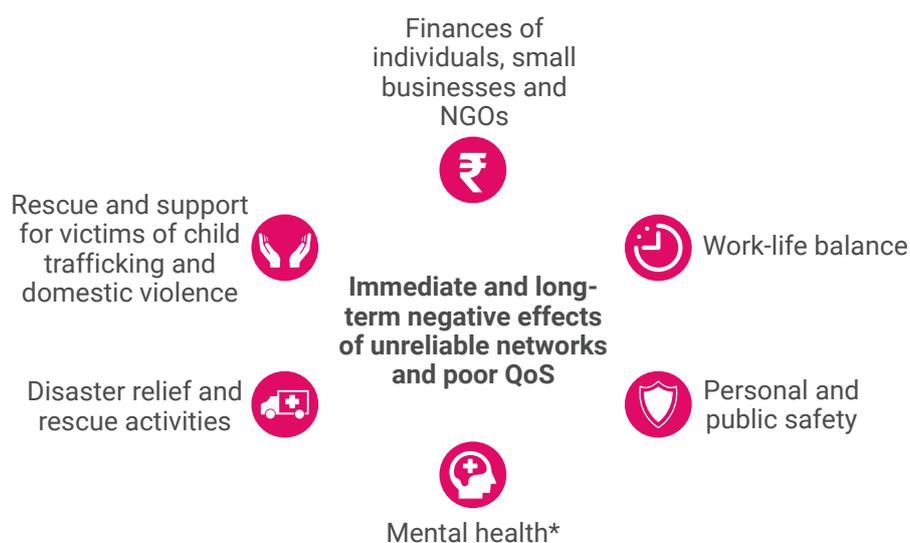
The strongest motivation for undertaking this study was to address the lack of information and human stories from the ground in Manipur. The region's absence from national consciousness compelled us to delve into numerous social, political, economic and cultural complexities to enable the reader to view our findings in Manipur's unique context.



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Designed by **Saumyaa Naidu**

Findings



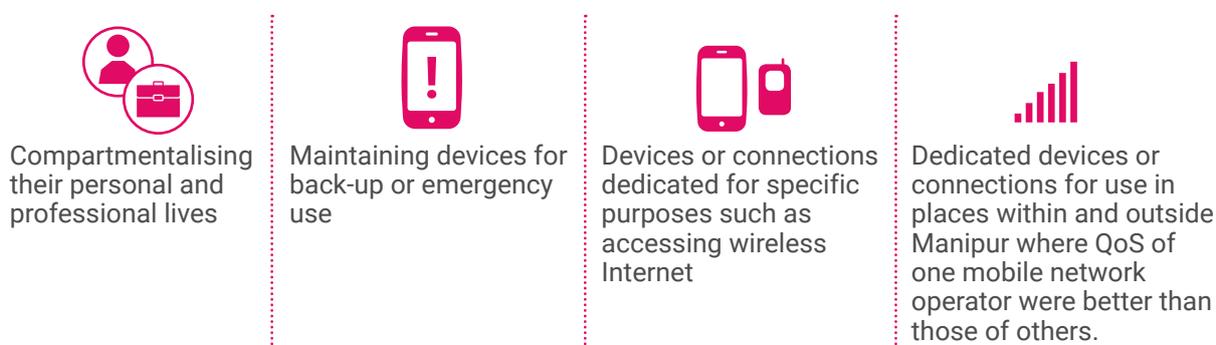
* especially because of compounding effect of anxieties over safety, a lack of work-life balance, the decline of personal, professional and social relationships, and the milieu of constant violence and unrest.

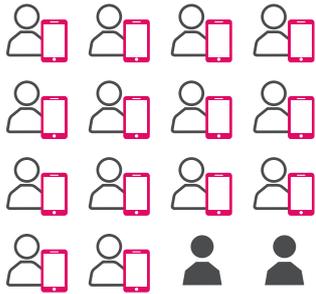
Use of the Internet and mobile devices

WhatsApp and **Facebook** were the most popular platforms for **activism and public mobilisation**. A combination of strategies was implemented to ensure communication among social and professional circles because the problem of poor QoS is perpetual. **SMS groups** in which the members and purpose are predefined and phone calls were used to communicate to people in areas with no network coverage and/ or lack of digital literacy (i.e., some people in the circle did not know how to use email or WhatsApp). In places where capacity for using WhatsApp existed but not for using email, WhatsApp was the only mode of Internet communication.

Women in their twenties actively use the Internet for gaining knowledge and learning skills that contribute to their livelihoods.

Some respondents owned multiple mobile devices, SIM cards and wireless connections as a means of:

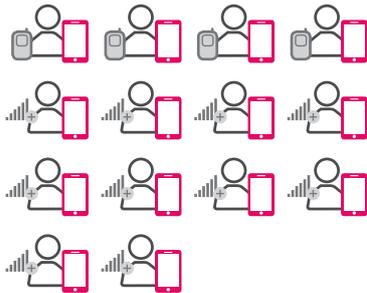




Smartphone Use

14 out of 16 respondents used at least one smartphone.

2 respondents used only basic mobile phones that were not Internet-enabled. One of them did not have the means to buy a smartphone, and the other borrowed it from a family member when needed.



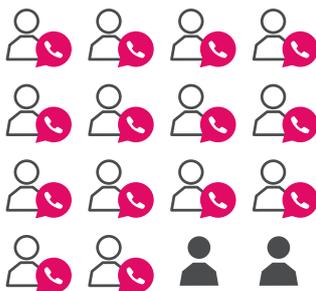
4 out of the 14 respondents used feature phones or basic phones as a means of compartmentalising their personal and professional lives or as back-up devices or as purpose-specific devices

10 of the 14 used more than one mobile connection, also for the reasons of separating the different roles they play, as back-up connections, for use in different locations



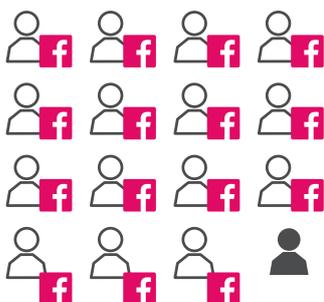
Email Use

15 out of 16 respondents used email.



WhatsApp Use

14 out of 16 respondents used WhatsApp as a primary mode of communication.



Facebook Use

15 out of 16 respondents owned Facebook accounts and used them regularly for personal communication.

Use of email, WhatsApp, Facebook and mobile phones among the surveyed group

"I talk to managerial staff of my organisation on the phone and WhatsApp... I use Truecaller. Until and unless it shows a name I do not pick up [answer] calls. Anonymous numbers can be from underground and there can be threats. Hence, we establish filters for calls."* -- An entrepreneur

*Underground groups (UGs) is an umbrella term for insurgent outfits in Manipur.

"[I referred to] Archive.org for my dissertation. I also use YouTube to get video which are helpful for adolescents, like menstrual hygiene... I download[ed] the Constitution and [its] Articles. I also download other apps for entrance exams like UPSC... I gain knowledge through the Internet, I say. It was very much helpful during my dissertation because I could not find these papers on women's studies elsewhere." -- A researcher and teacher

"I work with [victims of] domestic abuse and child victims of trafficking. Bad networks affect my work because I can't communicate [with the victims or my colleagues]. It affects the cases, especially it leads to loss of information when talking with the victims. The lapses in the information has [sic] sometimes led to the cases failing in court. Sometimes I could not reach the location for rescues in time because of bad network. During some incidents when people have contacted me, I was not reachable. The incidents blew out of proportion because of lack of intervention by me." -- An activist and rescue worker

"If there is no proper network, it slows down my work... I can't send the reports for funders on time and because of this it discourages many funders to work with us." -- An NGO worker

Disaster rescue and relief

An elected member of a *gram panchayat* stated that she was unable to seek help in her official capacity because of bad network connectivity. No rescue operations were carried out in her village.

State of network coverage

Network coverage varies across the state. BTS, also known as mobile towers, in hill districts are scarcer and face greater shortfall of electricity. Out of 16 districts in Manipur, the hill districts of **Senapati, Chandel, Ukhrul** and **Pherzawl** have zero mobile network coverage according to data obtained at the time of writing from the Quality of Service Analytics website of the TRAI. Publicly available data about network coverage and QoS of different telecom operators provided by the TRAI, DoT and other government bodies is **inconclusive** because Manipur has been bundled together with six other states under the "north east" category.



Internet Shutdowns

③ distinct instances of intentional Internet shutdowns, intentional Internet shutdowns were identified, two of which were implemented in the wake of public unrest and violence:

September 2015, following violence in Churachandpur district

December 2016, during the economic blockade and counter-blockade in Imphal

(See **3. Life in the time of shutdowns, Of Sieges and Shutdowns**)

One shutdown of Internet and wireless voice services in the erstwhile newly-formed district of Kangpokpi was reportedly implemented to prevent potential disruption during its first election for the state legislature. The respondent from Kangpokpi mentioned a marked decrease in the QoS on the days of polling and ballot-counting in **February 2017**, indicating the possibility of undeclared or surreptitious shutdowns and/ or **bandwidth throttling**.

Loss of access to modes of communication in a conflict-ridden geography exacerbated risks to personal and public safety.

The sentiment that intentional Internet shutdowns are a **violation of the freedom of speech and expression** ran strong among the respondents. The women we surveyed actively conducted **non-violent public mobilisation, peaceful protests and peacebuilding activities**, further strengthening the need to advocate for reliable access to the Internet for women's groups in the state.

- Subscribers of state-owned telecommunications company BSNL found that its services continued to work in the time of intentional Internet shutdowns.
- No public notification was made for any of the three shutdowns reported in the interviews.
- Wired Internet and wireless voice services were unavailable in the time of wireless Internet shutdowns.

Research Questions

I. What do women entrepreneurs and women activists located in Manipur use the mobile phone and the Internet for?

1. What devices do they use to access the Internet? Who owns those devices? (Mobile devices such as smartphones, feature phones, basic mobile phones and tablets; mobile devices shared with one or more members of the family; other networked devices such as Ethernet routers)
2. Over the past 40 years, that is, since 1977:
 - i. How has their access to the Internet changed?
 - ii. How has their access to mobile communication devices changed?
3. Is there a difference between usage of mobile devices that are Internet-enabled and those that are not?
4. Are there limitations or barriers to their access to the Internet and mobile networks?
 - i. If yes, what are those limitations or barriers, as articulated by them?
 - ii. What do they do to circumvent or overcome those barriers?
5. What are the software applications they use on their Internet-enabled devices?

II. Are there documented and verifiable instances of intentional shutdowns of the Internet and/ or mobile networks in Manipur?

1. If yes, what was the nature of these shutdowns in terms of their time of occurrence, duration, scope, location within Manipur, type of Internet technology (i.e., wireless Internet, wired broadband, mobile voice networks), and the reasons cited, or lack thereof, for implementing the shutdowns?

III. How are the personal, professional, and social lives of women in Manipur impacted and affected by temporary, intentional shutdowns of the Internet and/ or mobile networks?

1. How do the affected women overcome or mitigate negative effects of shutdowns, and what tangible steps have they taken or considered taking?