



# NEIG - A Perspective

## A PERSPECTIVE ON INTERNET GOVERNANCE IN NORTH EAST INDIA

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The scope of internet governance is constantly evolving from being focussed exclusively on perspectives from science and technology studies to addressing social issues emerging from internet use. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major push



towards the recognition of the need to provide access to ICT for meaningful usage. Internet and digital governance, policy and regulation have emerged as critical inputs needed to consider the impact of the internet and digital innovation and growth on people, communities, biodiversity and the natural environment. The purpose of the Global Internet Governance Forum (IGF) is to provide a platform for multi-stakeholder debate and discussion on a wide range of themes. In 2021, the Indian government launched the nation-specific chapter of IGF, the India Internet Governance Forum (IIGF) to attend to the nation's E-Governance and National Security issues, among other aspects.

## **Emerging trends on Internet Governance in North East India**

### **Internet connectivity**

In terms of internet access in the North Eastern Region, internet penetration and tele density of the region have been low with Assam (28.2%), Meghalaya (34.7%), Tripura (22.9%) being among states and union territories with less than 40% women using the internet, per NFHS 5 (2019-20). In terms of the percentage of schools with functional computer facilities, a majority of the North Eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh (26.61%), Assam (16.22%), Manipur (33.29%), Meghalaya (14.67%), and Tripura (21.52%) fall below the national average of 41.3% schools with computer facility. The North Eastern states of Sikkim (78.78%), Mizoram (51.44%), and Nagaland (47.11%) perform better than the national average<sup>1</sup>. However, the numbers are negatively affected in terms of access to functional computer facilities and access to the internet.

Further, a 2021 reply from the Union Ministry of Communication, Department of Telecommunications to the Lok Sabha revealed that then at 2223 villages, Arunachal Pradesh had the highest number of inhabited villages with no mobile connectivity in the region, followed by Meghalaya (1674). The rest of the states too had a widely varied but sizeable number of villages without mobile connectivity. Of 10 villages, Sikkim had the least number of inhabited villages with no mobile connectivity, followed by Tripura (31). The rest of the states of Assam (616), Manipur (463), Mizoram (206), Nagaland (144), and Tripura (426) had a significant number of villages without mobile connectivity<sup>2</sup>.

### **Freedom of speech online, digital crime and safeguarding human rights**

Several arrests of individuals, most notably from the states of Assam and Manipur, have been reported based on posts they made on social media. The arrests have invited questions about human rights and freedom of speech online. The arrests have been short-term in nature as they could not be rationalised in the face of civil society condemnation. (Manipur: Why the arrest of Rights activist Mark Thangmang Haokip sparked unrest, 2022) However, there is a need to work out proper regulations to ascertain the proportionality of such posts warranting arrests to better safeguard the rights of individuals posting their opinions.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) report.

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://morungexpress.com/144-inhabited-villages-without-mobile-connectivity-in-nagaland>

In the list of options employed to contain disinformation and/or misinformation and more recently to avoid the use of unfair means in government service entrance examinations<sup>3</sup>, internet shutdowns are becoming another variation in the modes of governance employed in the northeastern states. Recently the state of Meghalaya faced internet shutdowns affecting 7 days in an effort to contain public discontentment and onslaught brought about by a border dispute at the Assam-Meghalaya borderlands. However, despite the internet shutdown, violence broke out days later drawing attention to the ineffectiveness and performative nature of the internet.

State	Number of days affected by internet shutdown in 2022 <sup>4</sup>
<b>Arunachal Pradesh</b>	3
<b>Assam</b>	2
<b>Manipur</b>	5
<b>Meghalaya</b>	7
<b>Mizoram</b>	0
<b>Nagaland</b>	0
<b>Sikkim</b>	0
<b>Tripura</b>	0

shutdowns employed as a preventive technical measure for primarily social issues. Further, there are tangible losses to internet shutdowns with economic losses being the most convincing argument for various sections of society. The table below depicts the number of days affected by internet shutdowns in the northeast.

State	Number of reported cybercrimes in 2021
<b>Arunachal Pradesh</b>	47
<b>Assam</b>	4846
<b>Manipur</b>	67
<b>Meghalaya</b>	107
<b>Mizoram</b>	30
<b>Nagaland</b>	8
<b>Sikkim</b>	0
<b>Tripura</b>	24

<sup>3</sup> Source:

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/assam-mobile-internet-shut-down-for-grade-iii-exams-2nd-such-instance-in-eight-days/articleshow/93837186.cms>

<sup>4</sup> Numbers aggregated from news reports.

## **Cyber-crime and cyber security**

With the increase in internet and ICT usage in the country, crimes have moved to yet another domain of cyber crimes. A survey by TrustCheckr, a data analytics startup found that at 41%, the highest UPI scams are experienced in eastern states with every northeastern state on the list. (41% of Digital Frauds accounted in the Eastern Region of India, 2021) The categories of online fraud were found to be KYC, fake cash-back, frauds through digital wallets, fake-selling, QR codes, UPI phishing, lottery scams, and financial frauds on social media. Cyber-enabled scams and fraud are evolving at a rate that even otherwise technologically equipped and skilled individuals have found it difficult to evade.

In September 2022, based on information received from the Crime Against Children (CAC) unit of INTERPOL, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) conducted raids in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura in connection with cases of downloading and transmission of CSAM (Child Sexual Abuse Material). (Assam and Arunachal Pradesh under CBI's Megh Chakra operation, 2022) The northeastern states differ greatly in terms of cybercrimes reported from the region with Assam accounting for close to 5,000 cases of all cybercrimes and followed by Meghalaya at 107 cases as reported in the last NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) records. (Crime in India 2021 NCRB, 2022) There is a scope for deliberating on the challenges of countering cyber crimes and reviewing existing legislation in terms of its purpose and efficacy in combating computer-related crimes.

## **Responsible data governance**

Mere presence of the internet does not guarantee the visibility of people to the data processes or their ability to access and configure data to create instead of being relegated to being passive consumers and subjects of data processes.<sup>5</sup> (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2021) There is a need to move away from thinking about the relation of marginalised communities with the internet only in terms of digital divide, and access to internet and ICT. The issues of data governance range widely from ethics of

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Ada Lovelace Institute. (2021). *The data divide*. Available at: <https://www.adalovelaceinstitute.org/report/the-data-divide/>

collecting and storing data without infringing on privacy to diversity and inclusion in contributing information. Discrepancies in the capabilities of the user and configuration of the digital media can keep one from being able to fully utilise the internet to better their list of choices and alternatives to lead their lives. The use of complicated electronic contracts and language barriers are some examples of such a discrepancy. When such a discrepancy arises, often the tendency is to render the people who are not easily accommodated in the set of parameters, fields, or with possession of documents in the right configuration mandatory for availing government services to be left disenfranchised from the new systems of welfare. At the other end of the extreme, there is the risk of losing control over the circulation and privacy of data disclosed to obtain a service. There is a necessity to deliberate upon ways to make digitally mediated spaces both safer and more inclusive.

### **Emerging technologies (AI/ML)**

Artificial Intelligence has slowly started making inroads in North East India via initiatives by both private and government organisations. Artificial intelligence depends on large sets of high-quality and unbiased data. The scope of AI has been evolving at a rapid pace and with the technology being already employed to generate credit scores for suitability against loan applications<sup>6</sup> and preventive policing in certain corners of the nation, there is a need for more awareness and transparency in the processes by which the technology is making a way into the region to ensure the reliability of data sources and introduce new databases to reflect the evolving nature of data. The algorithms should be open to audits to reflect the important variables, the rationale behind their selection, and the weights allotted to them in a way to place checks against biased decision-making and to allow people to make informed choices.

### **Strengthening Internet Governance in North East India**

The issues around Internet Governance in North East India cannot be overlooked and are considered irrelevant, from the wider user community perspective. While the adoption, adaptation and usage of Internet and digital processes, products, and platforms have seen increasing penetration in the region, there is a lack of engagement amongst stakeholders to discuss the issues and solutions around emerging internet governance issues, and by extension, a lack of knowledge sharing and knowledge

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<sup>6</sup> Source: <https://techherald.in/technology/how-nbfcs-in-india-better-decisions-with-ai-and-ml/>

building around the emerging technologies in the region. There is a need for strong policy and programme focus at the state government level to ensure preparedness. The existence of regional and national fora for discussion on policy issues related to the internet can help streamline an agenda towards action on context-specific issues by protective, and consensus-based mechanisms and measures to deal with internet governance issues affecting the social and economic processes in the region, going to accelerate further in next few years.

Due to the late initiation into the development paradigm of the nation and due to its hilly terrain and frequent natural calamities such as flooding and landslides, there is an infrastructural gap in the region. In the case of internet and mobile connectivity permeation, there are still a sizeable number of villages in the region without mobile connectivity. However, despite low tele density (number of subscribers per hundred inhabitants) and internet penetration in the region, cybercrimes and fraud are fast emerging in the digital landscape of the region, among other issues. While low internet and mobile network connectivity is another added layer of the infrastructural gap in the region, the new pressures of internet governance issues emerging in the region greatly affect the chances of navigating the internet in a safe and confident manner. This will determine the ability and capacity of the current and emerging generation to reap the benefits of digital society and economy of the region.

The scope of the internet is constantly evolving and it is hard to predict too far into the future, but responsible understanding and handling of the diverse perspectives around the Internet and its governing processes call for a collaborative effort in having standard regulations and practices in tune with history, culture and etymology of the region.

## ANNEXURE

### Mapping the North East Internet Governance (NEIG) Issues

#### 1. Internet Shutdowns

For the purpose of this note, the number of internet shutdowns was accounted for in terms of the number of days affected by internet shutdowns in the year 2022. The numbers were aggregated from newspaper reports.

State	Number of days affected by internet shutdown in 2022 <sup>7</sup>
<b>Arunachal Pradesh<sup>8</sup></b>	3
<b>Assam<sup>9</sup></b>	2
<b>Manipur<sup>10</sup></b>	5
<b>Meghalaya<sup>11</sup></b>	7
<b>Mizoram</b>	0
<b>Nagaland</b>	0
<b>Sikkim</b>	0
<b>Tripura</b>	0

In the recent years, every northeastern state, with the exception of Mizoram and Sikkim, has faced internet shutdowns. Internet shutdowns in the northeast started in the year 2015.<sup>12</sup> In one of the longest internet shutdowns in the region, in 2016 Manipur faced a 12-day internet shutdown during an economic blockade by a pressure group.<sup>13</sup> In February 2019, Arunachal Pradesh faced an internet shutdown for at least 7 days to contain protests against the granting of permanent resident certificates to 6

<sup>7</sup> Numbers aggregated from news reports.

<sup>8</sup> Source:

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/48hr-internet-shutdown-in-itnanagar-over-bandh-to-demand-pema-k-handu-resignation-101642012550503.html>

<sup>9</sup> Source:

<https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/internet-services-shut-down-in-27-assam-districts-for-govt-job-exam-1994021-2022-08-29>

<sup>10</sup> Source:

<https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/manipur/manipur-suspends-mobile-net-for-five-days-cites-tense-communal-situation-8077083/>

<sup>11</sup> Sources: i) <https://www.medianama.com/2022/11/223-internet-shutdown-meghalaya-7-districts-report/>  
ii)

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/meghalaya-govt-extends-internet-suspension-by-another-48-hours/articleshow/95747239.cms>

<sup>12</sup> Source:

<https://www.eastmojo.com/news/2019/02/13/surprised-at-net-shutdown-in-manipur-no-it-wasnt-the-first-time/>

<sup>13</sup> Source:

[https://101reporters.com/article/Society/Internet\\_shutdowns\\_cripple\\_fledgling\\_IT\\_industry\\_in\\_Manipur](https://101reporters.com/article/Society/Internet_shutdowns_cripple_fledgling_IT_industry_in_Manipur)

communities<sup>14</sup> in the state.<sup>15</sup> In 2019, Assam<sup>16</sup> and Tripura<sup>17</sup> faced an internet shutdown for 9 days and 2 days each during the CAA/NRC protests. In 2021, Mon district in Nagaland<sup>18</sup> faced an internet shutdown due to civilian killings by security forces. In 2018, Tripura imposed an internet shutdown after the circulation of fake news led to the lynching and the death of 3 people.<sup>19</sup>

When it comes to keeping track of internet shutdowns, *internet shutdowns*.in the site maintained by Software Freedom Law Centre, a donor-supported legal services organisation has emerged as a prime resource within the nation where a government record of internet shutdowns is missing. The site has aggregated the instances of internet shutdowns enforced, some lasting longer than 24 hours, from newspaper reports since 2012.

## 2. Cyber Crimes & Frauds

The table reflecting the number of reported cybercrimes in the region for the year 2021 was aggregated from the National Crime Records Bureau report published in 2022.

State	Number of reported cybercrimes in 2021
<b>Arunachal Pradesh</b>	47
<b>Assam</b>	4846
<b>Manipur</b>	67
<b>Meghalaya</b>	107
<b>Mizoram</b>	30
<b>Nagaland</b>	8
<b>Sikkim</b>	0
<b>Tripura</b>	24

<sup>14</sup> Source:

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/shutdown-brings-life-to-a-halt-in-arunachal-pradesh/article26333130.ece>

<sup>15</sup> Source: <https://www.medianama.com/2019/03/223-arunachal-pradesh-internet-shutdown/>

<sup>16</sup> Source:

<https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/caa-protests-assam-realises-internet-is-much-more-than-social-media-6177897/>

<sup>17</sup> Source: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/top-news-today-evening-10-12-2019-6160139/>

<sup>18</sup> Source:

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/nagaland-civilian-killings-internet-sms-services-suspended-in-mon-district-sit-to-probe/articleshow/88107404.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>19</sup> Source:

<https://www.trtworld.com/asia/indian-state-cuts-internet-after-three-new-lynchings-are-sparked-by-rumours-18557>

Newspaper reports of a survey by *TrustCheckr*, a data analytics startup, was referred to highlight the rising instances of digital fraud in the region.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Freedom of Expression Online and Designated Crimes

Over the years, there have been numerous cases of arrests based on social media posts of individuals in the region. Some cases in Assam for the year 2022 have been the arrest of a 19-year-old college student,<sup>21</sup> and of youth making claims of corruption.<sup>22</sup> Manipur is another state where such arrests are more common than the other states.<sup>23</sup>

### 4. Gender Digital Violence

Online Gender Based Violence has noticed an upsurge in the region. Gender-based Digital Violence can be of many types such as stalking, publishing of sexually explicit material, and cyberbullying. Under IPC section 354D, the National Crime Records Bureau report explicitly segregates cyber crimes against women under the lone category of *Cyber Stalking/ Bullying of Women/ Children*. The table below reflects the NCRB data figures pertaining to the year 2021 in the northeastern region.

State	Number of cases recorded under Cyber Stalking/ Bullying of Women/ Children, 2021
Arunachal Pradesh	1
Assam	31
Manipur	21
Meghalaya	0
Mizoram	4
Nagaland	0

<sup>20</sup> Source: <https://www.morungexpress.com/upi-payments-frauds-soar-high-in-eastern-indian-states-report>

<sup>21</sup> Source: <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/assam-student-jail-pro-ulfa-facebook-post-family-demands-release-8028631/>

<sup>22</sup> Source: <https://www.indiatodayne.in/assam/story/assam-youth-who-alleged-corruption-over-recruitment-exams-arrested-445323-2022-09-09>

<sup>23</sup> Sources: i) <https://nenow.in/north-east-news/manipur/manipur-22-year-old-arrested-for-social-media-post-against-cm-bjp.html>

ii) <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/activist-mark-t-haokip-arrest-leads-to-flaring-up-of-meitei-kuki-tensions-manipur-7940036/>

Sikkim	0
Tripura	0

## 5. Fake news, misinformation, disinformation

In the year 2020, during the lockdown, the nation saw a rise in cases of fake news and misinformation. Within the region Assam,<sup>24</sup> Manipur,<sup>25</sup> Meghalaya,<sup>26</sup> Mizoram,<sup>27</sup> and Nagaland<sup>28</sup> saw a strikingly high number of cases of fake news circulation.

Assam registered the highest number of fake news cases in the nation in 2017.<sup>29</sup> During the CAA/NRC protests, Assam saw a wave of fake news dissemination.<sup>30</sup> The state still has cases of mob violence based on fake news circulated via social media.<sup>31</sup>

In recent years there have been several cases of disinformation and fake news circulated in relation to Arunachal Pradesh, some due to the sensitive location of the

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<sup>24</sup> Source:

<https://www.firstpost.com/health/assam-police-fights-coronavirus-infodemic-52-cases-registered-25-people-arrested-for-spreading-fake-news-110-sent-for-counselling-8241161.html>

<sup>25</sup> Source:

<https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/how-manipurs-vaccination-drive-was-nearly-derailed-by-fake-viral-propaganda>

<sup>26</sup>Source: <https://theoptimist.news/meghalaya-police-quelling-the-infodemic-with-iron-hands/>

<sup>27</sup> Source:

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/11-arrested-in-mizoram-for-spreading-fake-news-on-coronavirus/articleshow/74581837.cms>

<sup>28</sup> Source:

<https://nenow.in/north-east-news/nagaland/nagaland-two-persons-booked-for-spreading-fake-news-on-social-media.html>

<sup>29</sup> Source:

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/assam-saw-highest-cases-of-fake-news-in-2017-ncrb/articleshow/71829277.cms>

<sup>30</sup> Source:

<https://thewire.in/rights/assam-violence-government-admits-intelligence-failure-monitors-social-media-posts>

<sup>31</sup> Source:

<https://www.guwahatipius.com/assam/assam-man-attacked-over-fake-news-of-child-lifting-in-cachar-10-held>

state.<sup>32 33</sup> There have also been cases of disinformation capitalising on the relatively lower visibility of Arunachal Pradesh in national news media.<sup>34 35</sup>

Similarly, with Meghalaya<sup>36</sup> and Nagaland,<sup>37</sup> a lack of collaboration with local reporters and deployment of grassroots reporters by national media houses have at times led to dissemination of misinformation. Regardless, fake news circulation within the states have also been an issue.<sup>38</sup> At times, the fake news circulation has been found to be politically charged<sup>39</sup>, or communally charged as with Tripura.<sup>40 41</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Source:

<https://newsvibesofindia.com/media-reports-of-villages-in-arunachal-pradesh-near-lac-being-vacated-are-fake-army-36060/>

<sup>33</sup> Source:

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/days-after-arunachal-clash-old-video-of-india-china-troops-fight-goes-viral-101671015794068.html>

<sup>34</sup> Source:

<https://www.indiatoday.in/fact-check/story/fact-check-arunachal-pradesh-bamboo-airport-bengaluru-airport-terminal-2295836-2022-11-10>

<sup>35</sup> Source:

<https://newschecker.in/fact-check/no-viral-video-of-arunachal-pradesh-village-is-actually-from-settlement-in-southwest-china>

<sup>36</sup>

<https://www.indiatoday.in/fact-check/story/fact-check-image-of-bsf-jawans-injured-in-meghalaya-bus-accident-is-from-2019-1915317-2022-02-19>

<sup>37</sup> Source:

[https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/ani-publishes-fake-news-about-possible-rohingya-attack-in-nagaland-apologises\\_in\\_5c11f865e4b0508b213689cd](https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/ani-publishes-fake-news-about-possible-rohingya-attack-in-nagaland-apologises_in_5c11f865e4b0508b213689cd)

<sup>38</sup> Source:

<https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/tripura/tripura-lynching-police-fake-news-social-media-north-east-5240292/>

<sup>39</sup> Source:

<https://www.eastmojo.com/tripura/2023/01/04/tripura-how-media-spread-fake-news-of-arson-at-biplab-debs-house/>

<sup>40</sup> Source:

<https://www.livemint.com/news/india/reports-about-mosque-demolition-in-tripura-fake-govt-11636822334623.html>

<sup>41</sup> Source:

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/5-criminal-cases-against-71-for-provocative-posts-on-social-media-tripura-police/article37320968.ece>

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