Summary of findings: Of Sieges and Shutdowns

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This summary is a highly abridged version of the findings of the pilot study *Of Sieges and Shutdowns* conducted by Chinmayi S K and Rohini Lakshané of The Bachchao Project. The study draws upon 16 qualitative interviews and as many first-person accounts to unravel and document the impact of unreliable mobile network connectivity and network disruptions on the lives of women in Manipur.
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Background

Manipur lies in northeastern India, bordering Myanmar and the states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Assam. Its capital Imphal is located in the eponymous valley nestled among its hills. The Imphal airport, the sole train station at Jiribam, and scenic and sometimes unmotorable roadways are Manipur's only modes of connectivity with the rest of the world.

In the 1960s, some local ethnic groups alleged that Manipur's merger with India initiated in 1949 was forced and demanded secession from the country. The resultant insurgency, armed conflict and political unrest continue to this day. Numerous underground groups (UGs), as insurgent groups are called, operate in Manipur. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 or AFSPA was enforced in 1980, requiring the presence of armed forces. Under the Act, security forces can operate in civilian territories with impunity from civilian law. Several NGOs and government committees have documented human rights violations and abuses of the power granted by AFSPA. Decades of military atrocities have caused local populations to resent and mistrust the Indian state and its security forces, feeding back into the cycle of violent conflict and the feeling of alienation. The most iconic protest for the repeal of AFSPA has been the 16-year hunger strike of Irom Sharmila. The Indian armed forces for their part maintain that they are doing their job in exacting conditions. Compounding the weary whirlpool of disarray and violence is long-standing ethnic conflict among the Meitei, Naga and Kuki groups.

Manipur has the 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. Activists working on issues of human rights and gender-based violence rely on the Internet for their activities. However, awareness of digital rights, digital security and online privacy among citizens is little.

Findings

Use of the Internet and mobile devices

The respondents' **personal use** of the Internet was limited to financial transactions, banking and communication with family and social circles. **Professional use** of the Internet covered a larger range of activities. All respondents who owned a smartphone were a part of at least one WhatsApp group meant for work-related communication, planning and coordinating the activities of their organisations and so on. Some also relied on the Internet for remote supervision of business, to seek help with resolving technical issues, accessing public notifications issued by the government and filing documents online.

Other uses of the Internet, mobile devices and PCs involved cloud storage services, accounting software, productivity and office software, email, instant messaging, social networking websites, VoIP, remote desktop access and collaboration, survey software, and tablets for collecting health-related data.

An entrepreneur used the Truecaller app to avoid answering calls from "underground groups" who are known to extort money from local citizens to fund their activities.

Activism and public mobilisation

WhatsApp and Facebook were the primary modes of communication for activism and mobilisation among the respondents and their professional circles. Nevertheless, most respondents said that they were aware that local activists were being subjected to surveillance and phone tapping. **This is possibly an indication of the need for greater awareness of alternative platforms and of digital security practices among activists in the region.**

Research and education

A researcher used the Internet to search for reference material on women's studies that was not available at the local public library and university. She accessed the Internet to prepare for public competitive tests for recruitment into different government services in India. As a teacher she used YouTube videos to educate adolescents on topics such as menstrual hygiene. Manipuri women commonly practise weaving, dyeing, embroidery, sewing, block printing and other traditional textile crafts as professional activities. One respondent in her early twenties said that she watches videos on YouTube to expand her knowledge of handmade embroidery and to learn to use new [types of] machines. **Both examples illustrate that young women actively use the Internet for gaining knowledge, nurturing their ambitions, and learning the skills that contribute to their livelihood.**
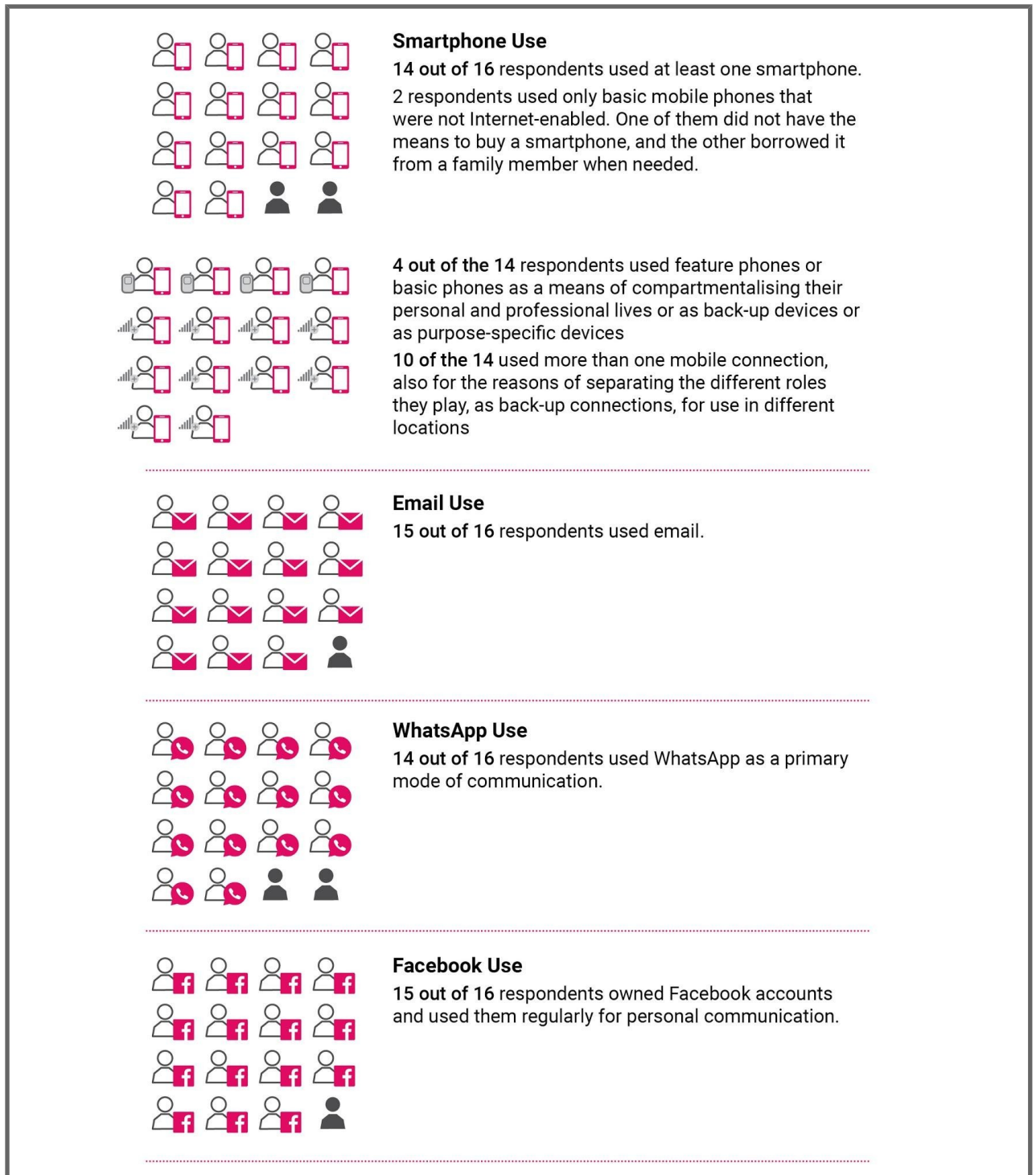
Smartphone Use

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.

Image 1. Use of email, WhatsApp, Facebook and mobile phones among the surveyed group

Role of women in peacebuilding and conflict management

We found that **women take the lead in non-violent mass mobilisation and peacebuilding activities in Manipur. This potentially strengthens the need to advocate for women to have reliable access to means of communication.**

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Impact of low and unreliable QoS on the surveyed group

Low quality of wireless network services and Internet shutdowns had immediate and long-term negative effects on the personal, professional, social, domestic and financial lives. Some of the most severe effects were on:

- **Finances** of individuals, small businesses and NGOs
- **Work-life balance**
- **Personal and public safety**
- **Mental health**, especially because of the compounding effect of anxieties over safety, the respondents' own lack of work-life balance, the strain on personal, professional and social relationships, and the milieu of violence and unrest.
- **Disaster relief and rescue activities**
- **Rescue and support for victims of child trafficking and domestic violence**

One respondent stated that low quality of service (QoS) affected her freedom of speech and expression.

Impact on professional life

We categorised the adverse impacts of their continual inability to communicate in a timely manner as:

Loss of professional standing

Not-for-profit organisations found that donor organisations were unwilling to provide them funds or work with them because of the difficulties involved in communication. Two respondents referred to a **loss of funding sources and strained professional relationships**.

Loss of professional efficiency, productivity and work-life balance

Respondents told us that they lost work hours to slow, weak or unreliable networks, which reduced their productivity, and in turn, their work-life balance. These imbalances adversely affected their emotional well being.

Hindrance to crisis interventions

Poor network services reduced the respondents' ability to respond or intervene in the time of crises and natural disasters. When the respondents who provide community support, aid, rescue or other interventions could be reached, it adversely affected entire communities and individuals in crisis. It also hampered their efforts for seeking justice for victims.

Loss of opportunities and professional credibility

The respondents' unavailability to important people in their professional circles, often for long periods of time, led to them missing opportunities. A respondent who served on a *gram panchayat* [local self-governance body in rural areas] said that weak and unreliable network connectivity negatively affected her work.

Economic losses

Poor Internet connectivity slowed down different activities in business operations

such as the procurement of raw material from places outside Manipur, causing significant economic losses to the respondents. Those working in not-for-profit organisations missed opportunities to seek grants and funds.

Impact on personal life

Personal safety and emotional well being

One of the respondents unequivocally stated that the **use of mobile phones increased the perceived levels of security among Manipuri women outside their homes and in public places**. A recurrent statement in different responses was that poor quality of voice and data services caused the respondents to feel vulnerable and anxious over their own safety and that of their near ones. Being continually disconnected from their social circles and family negatively impacted their domestic and social lives and strained their personal relationships.

Issues in the highlands

In the hills surrounding the Imphal valley, network issues were reportedly worse. One of the causes is the **shortfall of electricity** supply to mobile towers. The respondents who lived in the highlands faced the same concerns over physical safety apart from experiencing feelings of isolation, anxiety or fear.

Use of mobile devices and the Internet during disasters

Manipur witnessed one of its worst floods in 2015. In the next two years, tropical cyclones Roanu (2016) and Mora (2017) hit Manipur. A powerful earthquake struck Manipur in January 2016. The responses about the use of the mobile phone and the Internet during these natural calamities may be clustered into five categories:

1. Respondents could use the Internet, mostly WhatsApp and Facebook, to convey their status to their near ones and social circles as well as to post updates about the disasters.
2. Respondents could access mobile networks during and after a disaster had struck and had actively sought help by using phone calls, but they did not receive any relief.
3. Relief and rescue operations were hampered by poor QoS or complete lack of coverage. In places where no rescue operations were carried out, the poor QoS hindered disaster victims from securing help on their own. The respondent who held an elected position in a *gram panchayat* stated that she was unable to seek help in her official capacity because of bad network connectivity.
4. Respondents could access mobile networks (both voice and data services) and actively used them to coordinate disaster relief and rescue operations for affected people.
5. Some respondents either did not feel the need to use SMS, wireless voice or wireless Internet services for disaster relief activities or they chose not to do so.

Consumer relief for low QoS

The respondents were subscribers of one or more these telecommunications service providers: **Airtel, Aircel, BSNL, Vodafone, Idea, Tata (DoCoMo and Indicom) and Reliance Jio**. All respondents had experienced low and

practically unusable wireless Internet speeds, dropped voice calls, and low or zero strength of wireless signal at different times and places in Manipur. We could not investigate this finding further because of the financial and time constraints of this preliminary study**.**

## State of network coverage in Manipur

Airtel Open Network

Mobile network operator Airtel India provides public information about its networks through Open Network (https://www.airtel.in/opennetwork).

The Open Network map for Manipur shows **"good" to "excellent" coverage in and around the Imphal valley and practically no coverage in the highlands.** As the Open Network website acknowledges, the quality of network displayed on the Open Network map is not a definitive marker of the actual everyday experience of a user. A number of factors could affect this experience, even when the map shows excellent coverage.

TRAI data

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), an autonomous regulator established by the Indian government publishes QoS data submitted to it by all mobile network operators across the country. TRAI's Quality of Service Analytics portal displays on a map of India the visualisation of information about call drop rates and BTS density for every month[1]. Manipur and five other states constitute the "North East telecom circle", an administrative grouping. **Publicly available data about QoS and network coverage of different telcos in North East telecom circle have been lumped together**, **which makes it impossible to discern any information about network quality in the state.**

Network coverage varies across the state. Base Transceiver Stations (BTS), the technical term for 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 TRAI data at the time of writing.
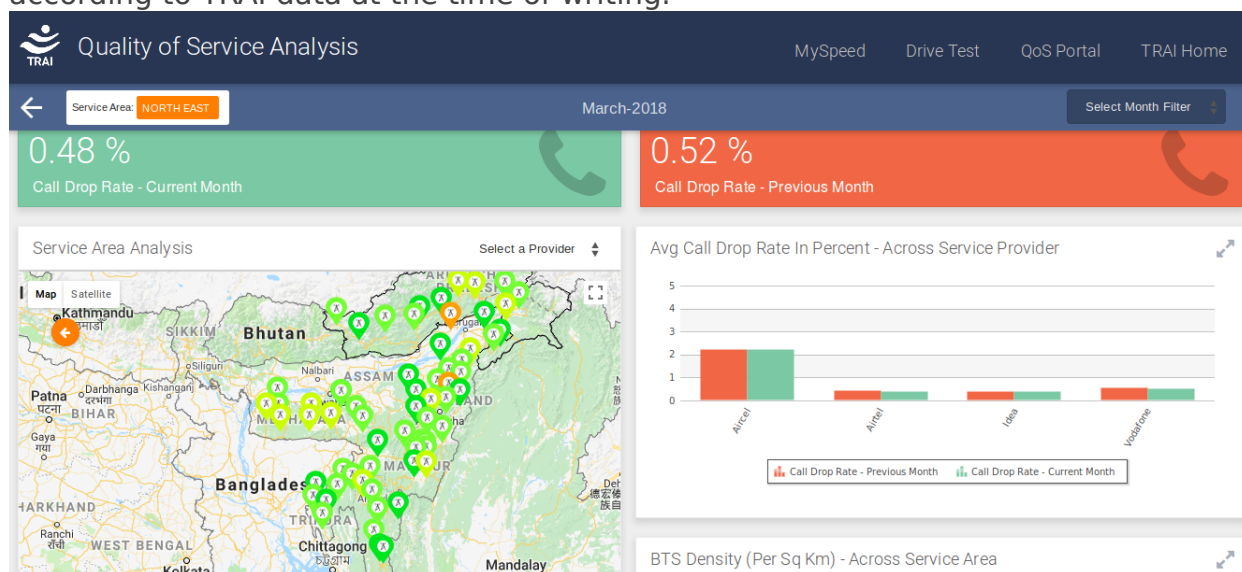
[1]Telecom Regulatory Authority of India. (March 2018). *Quality of Service Analytics.* Retrieved May 18, 2018, from http://www.analytics.trai.gov.in:8081/#/view

Image 2. Screenshot of TRAI's Quality of Service Analytics portal as of May 18, 2018

Other issues with TRAI's QoS data

The findings of a study conducted by the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), New Delhi and consumer welfare organisation Consumer Unity and Trust Society (CUTS) show that TRAI's QoS figures could be misleading or incorrect[2].

Government data

A search on the open data portal Data.gov.in did not yield any information about the use of the Internet and mobile phones specifically in Manipur. Like the TRAI, the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) clumps its data of Manipur with those of five other northeastern states.

Strategies to ensure communication

The respondents implemented a combination of strategies to ensure communication among their social and professional circles, because the problem of poor QoS is perpetual.

- **SMS groups** in which the members and purpose are predefined were used to communicate with people in areas with no data network coverage and/ or lack of digital literacy (*i.e.*, some people in their circles did not know how to use email or WhatsApp or both).
- In places where capacity for using WhatsApp existed but not for using email, WhatsApp was the only mode of Internet communication.
- Some respondents harboured multiple mobile devices, SIM cards and wireless connections as a means of:
  - Compartmentalising their personal and professional lives
  - Maintaining devices for back-up or emergency use
  - Redundant mobile connections, *i.e.*, as back-up when their primary network dipped low
  - Devices or connections dedicated for specific purposes such as accessing wireless Internet
  - Dedicated devices or connections for use in locations within and outside Manipur where QoS of one mobile network operator was known to be better than that of others.

Life in the time of shutdowns

We identified **three distinct incidents of intentional Internet shutdowns** in Manipur from our interviews, two of which were implemented in the wake public unrest and violence.

1. **During the economic blockade and counter-blockade:** From 17 to 30 December 2016, all operators of wireless Internet services were prohibited from running their services in East Imphal and West Imphal districts by orders of their respective District Magistrates. The shutdown was ordered on the grounds that the Internet, especially social networking websites and instant messengers such as WhatsApp, were being used to spread rumours that could aggravate the erstwhile violence and arson happening in Manipur.
2. **On account of violence in Churachandpur, September 2015:**

[2]CUTS, IIT Delhi. (2016). *Mobile Internet Services in India: Quality of Service*. Retrieved May 12, 2018, from www.iitd.ac.in/research/IITD/1615_QoS_Report_CUTS_IIT.pdf [PDF]

Internet and voice services were shut down from 1 to 8 September 2015 in the wake of violence in Churachandpur district where protests against the introduction of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) regime were the strongest.

3. The third was a shutdown of Internet and wireless voice services in the erstwhile newly-formed district of **Kangpokpi**. It was reportedly implemented to **prevent potential disruption of law and order during state legislature elections**. A respondent from Kangpokpi mentioned a marked decrease in data speeds and inability to make or receive calls on the days of polling and ballot-counting in February 2017, indicating a possibility of **undeclared or surreptitious shutdowns and/ or bandwidth throttling**. It is worth noting that troops of paramilitary forces and additional batches of police personnel are deployed during elections in sensitive regions in India to prevent or tackle activities detrimental to conducting polls.

Shutdown during economic blockade, December 2016

Four noteworthy findings emerge from the interviews:

1. Some respondents experienced that services for wireless Internet, wireless voice, SMS, and wired Internet were turned off even though the official orders were to shutter only "mobile data service". Some others were able to access mobile phone calls and wired broadband services during the Internet shutdown.
2. The government did not issue a public notification that it had implemented the shutdown.
3. Wireless voice and data services, including SMS, were only partially restored on 1 January 2017 despite the shutdown being called off.
4. Internet services of state-run telecom company BSNL were running during the shutdown for most subscribers, albeit with low quality. Services of all private telecom companies were shut.

Shutdown after violence in Churachandpur, September 2015

We find these commonalities with the shutdown of 2016:

- The government did not make a public announcement about the shutdown of wired and wireless Internet and wireless voice services. Most people were initially under the impression that the networks were undergoing issues 'as usual'.
- Most BSNL subscribers in Churachandpur were able to access its services, however slow and erratic, during the shutdown.
- Internet services, both wired and wireless, and SMS and wireless voice services of other telecom companies were inaccessible in Churachandpur.

The curious case of BSNL

Five different respondents stated that **services of Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) were active, albeit patchy, during various incidents of intentional network shutdowns in Manipur**. All public offices in the country are linked via BSNL networks. Our conjecture is that different government

entities, presumably, did not wish to be disconnected during the shutdown. We did not probe this finding further as such an activity would have been outside the scope of this phase of the study.

Effects of shutdowns

We identified seven different effects of intentional shutdowns. All respondents faced a combination of two or more effects.

1. Economic losses

As the shutdowns occurred simultaneously with an economic blockade and/ or situations of violent unrest, it is difficult to differentiate the economic effect of shutdowns from that of other situations and their aftermath. Most of the respondents spoke about inflation during the economic blockade. **None received compensation from the government for losses they incurred due to intentional shutdowns**. Entrepreneurs suffered economic losses when:
    a. They could not communicate with other entities in the supply-chain and their customers.
    b. They could not carry out online financial transactions. Presumably, the offline option was not available either because of curfews, *bandhs* or public unrest.
    c. One respondent spoke about the added strain of having to circumvent the established flow and processes in the supply chain.

The elected member of a *gram panchayat* said that only emergency calling facilities were working during the shutdown and it hampered her official work.

2. Safety

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

3. Loss of freedom of speech, expression and right to access the Internet

One respondent noted the need and rationale of intentional Internet shutdowns, or lack thereof, *"…Internet accessibility is my right; phone accessibility is my right. Someone in authority disconnecting me from all sources and all connections, that also for a long period of time… They could have developed better options and better mechanism to control all the issue…"*

4. Emotional well being

The respondents experienced feelings of fear, anxiety, insecurity, helplessness and frustration in the wake of shutdowns.

5. No support from the state during emergencies

The shutdowns deprived the people of access to their established support systems. No alternative support or redress was provided by the government during shutdowns.

5.1 Banknote demonetisation, 2016

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on 8 November 2016 that banknotes of denominations ₹500 and ₹1000 would cease to be valid tender from midnight. The move resulted in a severe cash shortage and hardship for the people over the next few months. **"Demonetisation" of banknotes, the indefinite economic blockade of 2016, and the state-initiated Internet shutdown in December the same year came as a triple whammy for the people of the Imphal valley.**

6. Loss of work hours and productivity

A respondent bore the monetary expense and inconvenience of travelling to and fro Guwahati in the neighbouring state of Assam to be able to use the Internet for a recruitment interview. Another stood the risk of losing the license to run her organisation. A third spoke of losing project time and work hours.

7. Strained personal, professional and social relationships

As in the case of unreliable mobile network services, Internet shutdowns caused a deterioration of communication within relationships.