Lived experiences: The interrelationship between ethnicity, class, gender, indigeneity, conflict and Internet access

Mary Beth Sanate

Written with inputs from Chinmayi S K

Edited by: Rohini Lakshané

Reviewed by: Rohini Lakshané and Tanveer Hasan

This text has been released under the [CC-BY-SA 4.0 International licence](#).

Preferred attribution: *Mary Beth Sanate, Community Toolkit for Greater Diversity (2019), Edited by* Rohini Lakshané.

*[**Editor's note**: Mary Beth Sanate, the author of this module, belongs to the Hmar indigenous group residing in the state of Manipur, India. The group is also an ethnic minority in the country. She elucidates on her own experiences of accessing and using the Internet and mobile networks as a resident of a rural district in the state.*

To give the reader a brief background, Manipur has been strained by decades of armed insurgency and ethnic conflict. Civil liberties in the state have been suspended since the year 1980 under a special law called the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act). The terrain outside the Imphal valley is hilly and difficult to access. The state is economically underdeveloped, having the third lowest per capita income in the country, according to [one set of statistics](#) published by the Indian government. Infrastructure is inadequate. Bandhs and curfews are a part of everyday life. Mary Beth shines a light on how women, ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, and underprivileged classes living in conflict-strained regions experience the Internet and mobile technology, which in turn, determines their ability to contribute to or benefit from open knowledge.

The views expressed in this learning module are the author's own. *Nevertheless, the module has been heavily edited for clarity, context and readability. "Community Toolkit for Greater Diversity" lays great emphasis on the active participation and undiluted voice of the author of every module. In the case of "Lived*

experiences: The intersection of ethnicity, class, gender, indigeneity, conflict, and Internet access" we made the decision to substantively edit the module in the favour of better context and readability. To that end, the editor has added several notes in square parentheses. The published version of the module has been expressly approved by the author.

The editor has written all exercises in the learning module, the glossary and the sections entitled "recommended reading" and "useful resources".]

Glossary

BSNL -- Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited, the state-run telecommunications service provider in India.

WLL -- Wireless Local Loop. Generic term for a telecommunication technology that works by

combining wireless mobile and radio communication.

FWT -- Fixed Wireless Terminal. A generic term for a device that supports WLL technology.

class -- a social stratum sharing basic economic, political, or cultural characteristics, and having the same social position. *(Source: Dictionary.com)*

ethnicity -- (1) an ethnic group; a social group that shares a common and distinctive culture, religion, language, or the like. (2) ethnic traits, background, allegiance, or association. *(Source: Dictionary.com)*

indigeneity -- originating in and characteristic of a particular region or country; native. *(Source: Dictionary.com, spelt "indigenity")*

Introduction

Even those people who have limited access to the Internet and only have old electronic devices are influenced by technology. Then, imagine how much would a privileged community that has got the best of things in life depend on technology. I guess these are words that go along with the use of highly "trendy" technology: *comfort, smart, innovative, quality, success, fame,* and so on**.** However, the lived experiences of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples tell a different story.

These groups have limited or no access to new communication technologies and lack the social, political, cultural and economic capital to gain such access. Even today, their means of mass communication is the village crier called *tlangsam [in the Hmar language spoken mainly in Churachandpur district in Manipur].* The village crier

makes announcements at the village square and other places on behalf of the *panchayat* chief or another authority. The announcements include information about recent deaths in the village, farming, social work, collective agricultural work, scheduled visits of government officials, and so on. Another means of mass communication is the ringing of the gong or village bell. It is reserved for emergencies and urgent announcements.

Unreliable mobile connectivity and lack of infrastructure

Today, India is the second largest mobile device market in the world. The rapid growth in the use of mobile phones has made the telecom companies such as BSNL, Reliance, Airtel, Vodafone and Jio flourish. Since the government launched the Digital India programme with the aim to improve online infrastructure and increase Internet connectivity, mobile phones and the Internet reached the rural northeast as well. Nevertheless, the quality of service is so poor that one is able to make or receive calls only in specific places such as a particular corner of the house or beneath a nearby tree. Unless one is present in a zone with strong network coverage, using the mobile phone or the Internet is extremely difficult and tedious.

The situation is made worse by the lack of regular supply of electricity. Many villages are yet to be connected to the electricity grid in spite of the government's announcement that all villages in India have been electrified. The ethnic communities living in remote parts of the country are groups that the modern world has left behind. Development with regard to online infrastructure and proper use of modern technology are dreams for them that they hope to achieve only in their next life.

*[**Editor's note:** "Limited access" to the Internet and mobile networks in the context of indigenous peoples and/ or ethnic minorities living in conflict-ridden and remote places could mean many things. Access is restricted by the lack of telecommunications infrastructure, poor quality of service which renders a network unusable even when it is present, shortfall of electricity, and lack of affordability of services and devices. Telecommunications equipment and infrastructure is also more difficult and time-consuming to set up and maintain in such areas. Weather conditions tend to be harsher in the hills, network outages may be frequent, and it takes more time and money to fix technical faults in these geographies. Additionally, frequent bandhs, curfews and conflict slow down the pace of setting up, repairing and maintaining infrastructure such as roads, electricity grids, and telecommunications networks. In the subsequent sections we shall see more factors that limit access to the Internet.]*

The situation is better in urban areas such as district capitals and state capitals. The youth there have started using online and offline [communication] technologies. The level of acquaintance with this technology may differ from one person to another. It is based on who they are and what they do for a living. The use of the Internet by the

majority of the young men and women in Manipur is limited to social networking websites and WhatsApp. There is scope for enhancing their skills to use the Internet.

[***Editor's note:*** *To delve deeper into the topic of enhancing their skills, please refer to the module entitled "*[*Designing outreach programs for ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples*](#)*".]*

Exercise:

[***Note to learners and trainers:*** *This exercise is best done with a peer group.]*

- Do you experience electricity outages, that is, power cuts in the village/ town/ city where you live?

  If your answer is "yes",

    - How often do power cuts happen? How long do they last?
    - Do you know why the power cuts happen? For example, "load shedding", planned maintenance, unplanned maintenance, technical faults, and so on.
    - Do you have access to backup power? Is the backup adequate and affordable?
    - How do power cuts affect your everyday life?
    - How do power cuts affect your access to knowledge and information?
    - How does it affect the way you contribute to Wikipedia and/ or its sister projects?

  If your answer is "no",

    - Consider a scenario in which the supply of electricity to your home or school is irregular. Power cuts are commonplace. You may not be able to afford diesel to power a generator. Power inverters, that is, backup batteries work only up to a few hours when fully charged. Refrigerators, TV sets, microwaves, and desktop computers cannot run on backup power, because they either require a lot of diesel or the kind of capacity power inverters cannot provide. How would it affect your everyday life?
    - Search for figures on the Internet about the percentage of homes in India that have been electrified, that is, connected to a power grid. Some sources: The World Bank, the Indian government's open data portal, [Data.gov.in](#), and the website of [India's Power Ministry](#).
    - Before you answer the subsequent questions, read the "[Demand](#)" and "[Problems](#)" sections of the Wikipedia article on "[Electricity Sector in India](#)". Also read the Wikipedia article [2012 India blackouts](#).
    - Refer to the learning module entitled "What is privilege?". By your own assessment, do you think you are more privileged than those who do not

>>> have access to uninterrupted supply of electricity? If yes, in what way are you more privileged?
>>> ○ Refer to the module entitled "An introduction to epistemic violence". Do you think "epistemic violence" affects the things we read and hear about Manipuris? Does epistemic violence affect the place Manipuris have in the public consciousness and in the public space in India?
>> ● In light of the answers you wrote and read (or spoke and heard) in this exercise and the previous one, how does the unavailability of infrastructure and utilities such as electricity affect the ways in which knowledge and information are produced and consumed by people?
>> ● Take a look at the citations in the articles in the Wikipedia Category "Manipur". Who are the authors of the references cited there? Do you see a pattern? What could you conclude from the information you found?

Internet and mobile access in rural areas in the 2000s

It was in 2004 that a few people in Manipur started using the Internet via BSNL's dial-up connections. I was then writing a research paper on "Practical Gender Needs in North East and Hill States", a study commissioned by the United National Development Program (UNDP) in collaboration with the India Social Studies Trust (ISST). Email communication was a major challenge that I faced at the time. As I did not own an Internet connection then, I depended on my boss' connection for sending my draft reports and other communication to the ISST in New Delhi. After a year, I got an Internet connection using the landline telephone service at my office. The speed was so slow that it would take me about half an hour and sometimes one hour to send one email. In such a situation, making use of Google or Wikipedia was out of the question. Let alone editing Wikipedia, merely being able to view its pages was a challenge.

Amongst the women in northeast India, I am relatively privileged as I have access to the Internet and mobile devices. Rural areas of Manipur and other northeastern states where I now work are worse off than the urban ones. When BSNL's WLL/FWT connections were introduced in the year 2005, almost all villages experienced poor service. Those connections were their only means of communication with the outside world. There was no hospital, post office or government office. The quality of network service at the local health care centre was poor. Until the year 2010, the entire village depended on one WLL connection, which was placed in the house of the village chief. It cost 5 rupees to receive calls from outside the village. The villages that had such a phone connection were fortunate among hundreds of villages that had no road or telephone connectivity with the outside world. ***[Editor's note:** This is a reference to the time before the "[calling party pays](#)" model was implemented in India. It used to cost money*

to both make and receive a call. Many people then found five rupees per minute a prohibitively expensive tariff to pay for receiving calls.]

Exercise:

Let us do an exercise. Please answer these questions as best as you can recall. You will need to refer to the answers from this exercise in subsequent exercises in this module. *[**Note to learners and trainers:** Some of these questions could be deemed as personal. If anyone is uncomfortable answering these questions in the presence of a peer group, they may answer them silently to themselves.]*

1. In what year did you:
   ○ first access the Internet?
   ○ make your first edit on a Wikimedia project (that is, Wikipedia in any language or any of its sister projects)?
   ○ get your own laptop or personal computer for the first time?
   ○ get your first mobile phone?
   ○ get your first smartphone?
   ○ get your own Internet connection?

2. Mary Beth's experiences are from the years 2004-05. What was your own experience of using the Internet and mobile phones at that time?

3. How was your experience similar to or different from Mary Beth's?

4. What does Mary Beth's experience indicate about the pace of economic development in her state? About the state of Internet access there?

5. How do the answers to Question #4 affect whether/ how people in the region can contribute to open knowledge?

Intentional Internet shutdowns

*[**Editor's Note:** "An internet shutdown happens when someone — usually a government — intentionally disrupts the internet or mobile apps to control what people say or do. Shutdowns are also sometimes called 'blackouts' or 'kill switches'. Here's a more technical definition developed by experts: 'An internet shutdown is an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information'." Source: https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton]*

Arson and violent protests broke out in the Chandel and Churachandpur districts of Manipur in August and September 2015 after three new draft laws regarding the ownership of land were introduced in the state. Nine people died after the people

opened fire on a protest. The photos of dead people were being circulated on the Internet, some with malicious information attached. The government shut down wireless Internet and mobile voice services in Churachandpur for more than 7 days in September and enforced an indefinite curfew as a part of its measures to check the spread of violence and public unrest. Bulk SMS services were also suspended. This was not the first time that a blanket shutdown of the Internet had been implemented in Manipur. Internet access in Manipur has always been ridden with problems. Sometimes, the issue is poor connectivity, but at other times, Internet access is cut off deliberately to stop information/ news from spreading out of the state. Internet shutdowns cause many hardships to people who depend on the Internet for their professional work. It becomes difficult to meet deadlines. Work comes to a standstill for days on end. Internet shutdowns also adversely affect our personal and social lives. We are deprived of entertainment, educational exchanges, and access to information, all of which are intended for the positive development of the society.

Exercise:

Take a look at any Internet shutdown tracker such as https://internetshutdowns.in.

- How many shutdowns have happened in metropolitan cities such as New Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai and Hyderabad? How many have happened in Manipur? How many have happened elsewhere in the country? What do your observations indicate? What could be possible reasons behind such indication(s)?
- How long have the shutdowns lasted?
- What was the reason cited by the government for implementing the shutdown?

Have you ever experienced an intentional Internet shutdown? If your answer is "yes", what was your experience like?

If you have never experienced an Internet shutdown, speak with one or more individuals who have and ask them these questions with their permission: (If you do not know anyone who has experienced it, refer to these texts listed in the "Recommended Reading section of this module and try to answer the questions yourself: "Of Sieges and Shutdowns" and "Internet Shutdown Stories".)

- How did the intentional Internet shutdown(s) affect your personal and social life?
- How did the shutdowns affect your professional life or studies?
- How do you feel when there is a shutdown, especially if it is prolonged?
- What were the reasons given by the government for implementing the shutdown?

Gender and Internet access in rural areas

The Women's Collective, a forum I am involved with, received two hundred Nokia mobile phone handsets *pro bono* from Microsoft a few years ago. The handsets were

distributed among rural women in Manipur. It was the first time most of those women were accessing a smartphone. Their excitement when holding the smartphones was immense. It also increased their confidence. One of the women said, "My sons and husband could not believe that I own a smartphone". Another shared, "My family members think that I would not be able to handle a smartphone, and so they wanted to take it away from me, but I learnt [how to use it] from younger girls and now I can handle [it] and so I am happy." The assumption that rural women are incapable of using modern technology such as mobile phones and the Internet is incorrect. When given the opportunity, they are able to handle and manage these technologies efficiently.

Exercise:

- Refer to your answers to the first exercise in this learning module. How has your experience of accessing telecommunications and the Internet been similar to Mary Beth's? How has it been different from Mary Beth's?
- Is access to technology difficult/ easy depending upon the gender of the user?
- What is the social and economic cost for accessing technology in rural areas? How is it different compared with urban areas?
- How would marginalised communities benefit if their access to technology improves?
- What are the gender stereotypes that are reinforced with increased access to technology?

Recommended reading

- **Of Sieges and Shutdowns**: **How unreliable mobile networks and intentional Internet shutdowns affect the lives of women in Manipur.** *Chinmayi S K and Rohini Lakshané*, The Bachchao Project. http://thebachchaoproject.org/of-sieges-and-shutdowns. 18 May 2018. Last accessed on 1 March 2019.
- **Mother, Where's my country?** *Anubha Bhonsle*. Speaking Tiger Books. ISBN 9789385288357. January 2016.
- **Cellphone Nation.** *Robin Jeffery and Assa Doran*. Hachette India. ISBN 9350093545. January 2013.
- **India Connected.** *Ravi Agarwal*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780190858650. November 2018.
- **Internet Shutdown Stories.** *Various authors*. Centre for Internet and Society. https://cis-india.org/internet-governance/blog/internet-shutdown-stories. Edited by Debasmita Haldar, Ambika Tandon and Swaraj Barooah. 17 May 2018. Last accessed on 1 March 2019. *(Stories from Manipur:* **Activist speak: Misinformation in Manipur** *and* **Internet shutdowns cripple fledgling IT industry in Manipur**, *both by Armstrong Chanambam. Stories from Tripura and Nagaland, two other states located in northeastern India.)*

- **Use of social media in Manipur – Women lag behind in technological advancement.** *Ninglun Hanghal.* GenderIT.org https://www.genderit.org/articles/use-social-media-manipur-women-lag-behind-technological-advancement. 21 February 2019. Last accessed on 1 March 2019.
- **India's all-female paper goes digital to make gender taboos old news.** *Vidhi Doshi.* The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/aug/10/india-all-female-newspaper-khabar-lahariya-gender-taboos-old-news. 10 August 2016. Last accessed on 1 March 2019.

Useful resources

- **Digital Equality** (https://digitalequality.in) has several useful resources to learn about Internet access and digital inequality in India. Last accessed on 1 March 2019.
- **Video: The world in a 20-rupee netpack.** Centre for Communication and Development Studies (CCDS). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WJAGStkvPA. 31 January 2014. Last accessed on 1 March 2019.
- **Internet Saathi** (http://internetsaathiindia.org) and **Helping Women Get Online** (https://hwgo.com) are digital literacy programs for bridging the online gender divide in rural India. You may read about these programs in order to learn about the different imbalances that affect Internet access and the steps necessary for bridging the different gaps. Last accessed on 1 March 2019.