



# CURRENT AFFAIRS



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## INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN INDIA

THIS ARTICLE COVERS 'DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS' AND THE TOPIC DETAILS OF "INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN INDIA". THIS TOPIC IS RELEVANT IN THE "POLITY AND GOVERNANCE" SECTION OF THE UPSC CSE EXAM.

### WHY IN THE NEWS?

India has consistently held the top position globally for internet shutdowns over the span of five years, constituting 60% of all worldwide instances of blackout from 2016 to 2022.

### STATUS OF INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN INDIA

- India has the dubious distinction of leading the world in internet shutdowns, experiencing a significant **780 internet blackouts between 2014 and 2023**. Just in **2023, there were over 7,000 hours of internet disruptions** documented in the country.
- These shutdowns are **often implemented in response to major events, such as the protests** surrounding the **Citizenship Amendment Act**, the **abrogation of Article 370**, and the **Farm Bills**.
- The state of Jammu and Kashmir has been particularly affected by internet restrictions, witnessing a staggering **433 shutdowns in the past twelve years**. Furthermore, Manipur experienced the **longest internet blackout in the country, lasting from May to December 2023**.
- These frequent and lengthy internet shutdowns have sparked critical discussions about whether India is adhering to international standards regarding internet access.
- A recent **report by Freedom House** paints a concerning picture: Global internet freedom has been on a **downward slope for 13 years straight**, with online human rights taking a hit in 29 countries.
- Interestingly, India's approach to internet restrictions differs from the global trend. While **internet shutdowns worldwide are most commonly used to quell protests, India's internet outages are primarily localised, affecting specific regions like districts, cities, and villages**.

### LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORKS

India's internet shutdown practices are enabled by a combination of legal loopholes. Here's a breakdown of the key laws involved:

- **Indian Telegraph Act:** This act, dating back to 1885, grants states broad authority to restrict internet access during “public emergencies” or for “public safety.” However, the act lacks clear definitions for these terms, creating an environment for potential misuse.
- **Section 69A of the IT Act:** This section empowers the government to censor online content. While its stated aim is to curb harmful or unlawful content, it has been used to block over 55,000 websites, raising concerns about freedom of expression.
- **Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act:** This law allows the government to block URLs associated with banned organisations. A notable example is the blocking of The Caravan magazine’s website, highlighting the potential for misuse of this act.

## IMPACT OF INTERNET SHUTDOWN

- **Fundamental Rights Violations:** Court rulings have established that internet access is a protected right under India’s Constitution. Shutdowns directly contradict these protections for freedom of speech, the right to information, and even the right to practise professions online.
- **Economic Disruption:** Businesses, especially startups and those reliant on online operations, suffer financial losses during shutdowns. Studies estimate substantial economic costs associated with these disruptions.
- **Journalistic Obstructions:** Journalists rely on the Internet to gather and share information. Shutdowns hinder their ability to report on events, infringing on the public’s right to know. This violates the fundamental right to freedom of the press established by the Supreme Court.
- **Erosion of Trust:** Frequent shutdowns breed distrust towards authorities. They raise concerns about censorship and a lack of transparency in decision-making.
- **Educational Obstacles:** Learning is hampered when internet access is restricted. Students lose access to online platforms and resources crucial for their education.
- **International Repercussions:** India’s frequent shutdowns attract international criticism and damage its reputation on the global stage.

## ARGUMENTS FAVOURING INTERNET SHUTDOWN

- **Curbing Hate Speech and Misinformation:** Shutdowns are seen as a way to prevent the spread of inflammatory content online that could incite violence or unrest. For instance, some cite the Delhi NCR internet shutdown during farmer protests on Republic Day as a measure to combat misinformation and maintain order.
- **Controlling Protests:** Supporters argue that shutdowns can hinder the organisation and mobilisation of protests that could disrupt public order and security. The government’s imposition of internet restrictions in Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370 is presented as an example of using shutdowns to prevent separatist movements.
- **Protecting National Security:** Some believe shutdowns can safeguard national security and sovereignty from external threats and cyberattacks. The government’s suspension of internet services in border areas during the standoff with China is used as an illustration of shutdowns to prevent potential espionage or sabotage.
- **Controlling Offensive Content:** Supporters argue that shutdowns can be used to restrict access to harmful or offensive content that might target specific groups or individuals. For example, some point to instances where internet access was blocked in certain regions to prevent the circulation of objectionable material.

## PRELIMS PRACTISE QUESTIONS

### Q1. Consider the following statements:

1. India's shutdowns are localised rather than nationwide, which differs from the global trend.
2. Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act allows the government to block URLs associated with banned organisations.

### Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

**Answer: C**

### Q2. What rights do internet shutdowns in India violate according to court rulings?

- (a) Right to privacy only
- (b) Right to freedom of speech only
- (c) Right to freedom of speech and right to information
- (d) Right to freedom of speech and right to practise religion online

**Answer: C**

## MAINS PRACTISE QUESTION

**Q1. How do internet shutdowns impact the economy of a country? Explore the economic consequences for businesses, particularly startups, during periods of internet blackout. Discuss potential long-term effects on investment and technological innovation.**

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