

Internet Shutdowns in India and Related Concerns

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Context - Recently, the Punjab government suspended mobile internet and SMS services for more than four days as it launched an operation to arrest a pro-Khalistani preacher. This is not an isolated incident in India, with the country recording the highest number of internet shutdowns in the world.

India has recorded the highest number of internet shutdowns in the world. Such shutdowns are never or almost never implemented in most parts of Europe, North and South America, and Oceania, while they are rampant in Africa and Asia.

Instances of Internet Shutdown

1. **Punjab:** The Software Freedom Law Center has recorded eight such shutdowns in Punjab alone.
2. **Southern States:** Southern states, on the other hand, have only recorded six such shutdowns in the same period, with no instance of internet shutdown in Kerala.
3. **Northern States:** Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh have recorded the highest number of internet shutdowns in India.

The Central government does not collate data on internet shutdowns imposed by state governments, which was strongly recommended by the Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology.

The Committee came down heavily on the use of internet shutdowns as a substitute for

enforcing law and order and wanted the reasons, duration, decision of the competent authority and of the review committees to be noted for every internet shutdown, and for the information to be made public.

Need for Internet Shutdowns

- **Civil Unrest:** Internet serves as a medium for the transmission of information through pictures, videos and text that have the potential to cause civil unrest and exacerbate the law and order.
- **Fake News:** Shutdowns in order to block the flow of information about government actions or to end communication among activists and prevent the spread of rumors and fake news.
- **Rumors:** Shutdown helps prevent the “spreading of rumors and misinformation using social media platforms which can hinder peace and law and order”.
- **Preventive Response:** Cutting off the Internet is both an early and preventive response to block restive groups to organize riots against the Government.
- **National Interest:** The Internet cannot be independent of national sovereignty. Therefore, the necessary regulation of the internet is a reasonable choice of sovereign countries based on national interests.

Implications of Internet Shutdowns

- **Education:** Shutdowns also impact education, as students and teachers are unable to access online learning materials and tools. This can lead to a disruption of education and a negative impact on academic performance.
For instance: A UN report noted that in Kashmir, long-standing restrictions on connectivity undermined the education of students relying on remote education,
- **Economy:** Businesses that rely on the internet to operate may suffer significant financial losses during shutdowns. This is particularly true for online retailers, e-commerce platforms, and other digital service providers.
For instance: A 2018 paper estimated that India lost around \$3 billion between 2012 and 2017 due to shutdowns.
- **Health:** The internet plays a critical role in disseminating health information and enabling telemedicine. Shutdowns can make it difficult for people to access vital health information or receive medical care.
- **Communication:** Internet shutdowns severely limit people’s ability to communicate with one another, both within the affected region and with the rest of the world. This can make it difficult to coordinate protests or other forms of social and political activism, as well as to stay in touch with friends and family members.
- **Human rights:** Internet shutdowns violate people’s human rights, including freedom of expression and access to information. They can also hinder the ability of journalists and activists to report on human rights abuses.
- **Politics:** Shutdowns can be used to suppress political opposition and prevent dissent. This is particularly true during elections or times of political unrest, where the government may seek to limit the spread of information that could be used against

them.

Way Forward

Internet shutdowns in India are a growing concern, with a significant impact on education, healthcare, and the economy. However, the government has no mechanism to assess the socioeconomic impact of internet shutdowns. It is also important to consider the principle of proportionality and the socioeconomic impact of such shutdowns while enforcing law and order.