



## Internet Shutdowns

**For Prelims:** [Internet shutdowns](#), [Article 21](#), [Artificial Intelligence](#), [Article 19](#)

**For Mains:** Internet Governance and Digital Rights in India, National Security vs. Digital Freedom

[Source: IE](#)

### Why in News?

A 2024 report by digital rights group 'Access Now' revealed a record-high number of global [internet shutdowns](#), with **Myanmar topping** the list with 85 shutdowns, **followed by India**.

### What are the Key Findings of the Report on Internet Shutdowns?

- **India:** India accounted for 84 of internet shutdowns, making up 28% of all shutdowns.
  - Manipur recorded the highest number of internet shutdowns in India with **21 instances**, followed by **Haryana and Jammu & Kashmir**.
  - In total, **16 states and Union Territories** experienced internet restrictions in 2024.
  - **Main Reasons for Shutdowns:** Shutdowns in India were primarily linked to **protests (41 instances)**, **communal violence (23 instances)**, and **examination-related security measures (5 instances)**.
    - Additional shutdowns were enforced due to **local conflicts and administrative decisions**.
    - Authorities often justify shutdowns as necessary to **prevent communal violence, riots, and misinformation spread** via social media.
- **Global:** A total of 296 internet shutdowns were recorded worldwide in 2024, the highest ever.
  - Myanmar(85), India, and Pakistan(21) together accounted for over 64% of all recorded shutdowns in 2024.

### Legal Provisions for Internet Shutdowns in India

- **Telecommunications Rules:** Internet shutdowns in India are governed by the [Telecommunications \(Temporary Suspension of Services\) Rules, 2024](#), issued under [the Telecommunications Act, 2023](#).
  - These rules **replace the Telecom Suspension Rules, 2017** and regulate the process of suspending telecom services, including the internet.
- **Authority to Issue Shutdown Orders:** Union Home Secretary (for national-level shutdowns) and State Home Secretary (for state-level shutdowns).
  - In unavoidable circumstances, a Joint Secretary-level officer (duly authorized) can issue an order, but it must be confirmed within 24 hours, or it will cease to exist.
- **Judicial Precedent:** The **Supreme Court of India** in the case of *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India, 2020* ruled that **indefinite internet shutdowns are unconstitutional** and that such curbs should meet the tests of **necessity and proportionality**.

- However, many shutdown orders lack proper documentation and justification.

## What Concerns Regarding Internet Shutdowns?

- **Violation of Rights:** Restricts [freedom of speech and expression \(Article 19\)](#) and limits Right to internet access recognized under [Article 21 \(right to life and personal liberty\)](#).
- **Lack of Oversight:** The Telecommunications Act 2023 retains provisions from the colonial-era **Telegraph Act, 1885**, allowing shutdowns.
  - There is a lack of strict independent oversight mechanisms, leading to **arbitrary implementation**.
- **Economic and Social Disruptions:** India experienced the third-largest economic loss due to internet shutdowns in 2023, with the total cost reaching USD 255.2 million.
  - **Businesses, students, and digital service providers suffer significant losses** due to prolonged shutdowns.
- **Impact on Democratic Processes:** Restrictions on digital communication **curtail press freedom, and democratic engagement**.
  - Shutdowns in protest-prone regions prevent **citizens from exercising their right to dissent**.
- **Impact on Governance:** Critics claim that frequent internet shutdowns contradict India's ambitions of becoming a global leader in [Artificial Intelligence \(AI\)](#), **digital governance, and technological progress**.

## Way Forward

- **Oversight:** Introduce **parliamentary scrutiny or an independent oversight body** to review shutdown orders.
- **Alternative Measures:** Instead of complete shutdowns, authorities can use **targeted content removal, fact-checking mechanisms, and social media monitoring**.
  - **Law enforcement training** on digital risk management can help mitigate threats **without blanket bans**.
- **International Best Practices:** The [UN Human Rights Council \(UNHRC\)](#) opposes arbitrary internet shutdowns, deems blanket shutdowns human rights violations, and urges making **universal internet access by 2030** as a human right.
  - [European Union](#) and [US](#) rely on **content moderation policies and cybersecurity tools** instead of blackouts.
- **Public Awareness and Advocacy:** Civil society groups should **raise awareness on digital rights and push for legal reforms**.
  - Digital literacy campaigns can help **counter misinformation** without resorting to shutdowns.

### **Drishti Mains Question:**

How do frequent internet restrictions affect democratic engagement, press freedom, and the right to dissent in India?

## UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

### **Mains:**

**Q.** What do you understand by the concept of “freedom of speech and expression”? Does it cover hate speech also? Why do the films in India stand on a slightly different plane from other forms of expression? Discuss. **(2014)**

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