

Measuring internet freedom in India in the last 10 years

How do internet shutdowns affect the daily lives of citizens, particularly in regions where they are frequently imposed? What are the primary reasons cited by the Indian government for imposing internet shutdowns?

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The story so far:

For five straight years, India has topped the global list of countries imposing internet bans, with about 60% of all blackouts recorded in the world, between 2016 and 2022 having been in India. State imposed shutdowns in the last decade have cited national security and threats to public order. However, rights groups have argued that these shutdowns also violate court directives.

Internet shutdowns

The Indian government imposed a total of 780 shutdowns between January 1, 2014, and December 31, 2023, according to data collected by the Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC). Shutdowns flared up during the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019, the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, and the

introduction of Farm Bills in 2020.

Internet disruptions in India accounted for more than 70% of the total loss to the global economy in 2020. Data shows India shut down the internet for over 7,000 hours in 2023.

Indian States and Union Territories can impose an internet shutdown only in case of a “public emergency” or in the interest of “public safety”, according to the Indian Telegraph Act. However, the law does not define what qualifies as an emergency or safety issue. The Supreme Court, in the landmark *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India* case, reiterated that internet shutdowns violate fundamental rights to freedom of expression and shutdowns lasting indefinitely are unconstitutional. Moreover, Courts have asked governments to make shutdown orders public, a provision poorly complied with, experts have noted.

British-era law

Regionally, Jammu and Kashmir saw the highest number of shutdowns – at 433 –

in the last 12 years. The longest blackout in 2023 took place in Manipur from May to December, amid ethnic clashes.

As of February 15 this year, internet shutdowns were active in Haryana amid the farmers’ protests.

The Union government invoked powers under a British-era law to suspend mobile internet as Punjab farmers are holding protests in Delhi.

Activists have pointed out that India failed to meet the ‘three-part test’ in imposing blackouts in J&K and Manipur. Under international law, to block any access to content or invoke coercive measures that violate people’s fundamental rights, countries should check if the action is provided for by law; pursues a legitimate aim; and follows standards of necessity and proportionality. The majority of internet outages in the last decade were localised to specific districts, cities and villages.

The trends differ globally: protests are the most common reason for internet shutdowns, followed by information

control and political instability.

Between 2015 and 2022, more than 55,000 websites were blocked, according to SFLC data. The biggest share of content censored was done under section 69A of the IT Act, by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. URLs were blocked due to links to organisations banned under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Recently, the Ministry ordered news outlet *The Caravan* to take down a story which alleged abuse, torture, and murder of civilians by the Indian Army in Jammu’s Poonch district.

On social media, almost 30,000 social media URLs (including accounts and posts) were blocked between 2018 and 2022, with the majority of requests sent to X.

A commonly cited reason for blocking websites is the escalating threat of cybercrime. As compared to 5,693 cases in 2013, India recorded more than 65,000 cases last year. Cases have risen by almost 434% between 2016 and 2022, according to the National Crime Records Bureau.

India and global trends

Global Internet freedom has declined for the 13th consecutive year, and the environment for human rights online has deteriorated in 29 countries, according to the latest Freedom House report. India’s ranking has hovered around the same benchmark in the last three years. This is a dip from 2016 and 2017, when India scored 59 points, to 50 points in 2023.

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