

THE COST OF INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Important Aspects of Governance, Transparency & Accountability including Right to Information and Citizen Charter

The movement led by farmers against the Central government's agricultural laws has become a part of our national and international discourse. Keeping aside the merits and demerits of the contentious legislation, the manner in which the Centre introduced the Bills and its actions towards countering the movement have raised plenty of concerns.

A principal concern among these has been the recurrent shutdowns, ordered by the Ministry of Home Affairs, of Internet services around many border areas of NCR since the unruly incidents on January 26. Unfortunately, these blockages are not new. [India shuts down Internet services more than any other democracy](#) in the world. The past four years have seen over 400 such shutdowns. Many parts of Jammu and Kashmir saw a partial restoration of digital services after a long period of 223 days — the longest Internet shutdown across the world — since the abrogation of Article 370 in the erstwhile State. Many, including UN rights groups, termed these shutdowns a form of collective punishment for people, and an overreach of governments on citizens' rights and liberties.

Internet shutdowns in 2020 costs India \$2.8 billion

Currently, Indian laws have vague provisions for suspending telecommunication services, including the Internet, during times of public emergencies, or, if required, for protecting 'public interest'. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court had declared in January 2020 that the right to access the Internet is one of our fundamental rights, alongside the freedom to carry on any trade, business or occupation over the medium of Internet, under Article 19 of the Constitution.

The impact of shutdowns becomes even more pronounced during a pandemic. During the COVID-19 outbreak, the ones with good connectivity and know-how of digital tools were able to carry on with their lives with relatively fewer disruptions. Meanwhile, the ones without digital literacy or connectivity found themselves completely left out of all social and economic systems.

Blanket bans on digital connectivity during the COVID-19 crisis may breed deep-rooted societal difficulties. The most vulnerable among us may be cut off from health and welfare alerts; there could be breaks in vital digital services, including those currently being used by hospitals to monitor the well-being of their patients at risk of infection, including the elderly, and pregnant women; students may lose access to avenues of learning as classes shift online; journalists may find it impossible to do ground-reporting from already volatile areas.

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Today, almost all white-collar employment sectors, including IT, financial and consulting services, are encouraging their employees to work from home. Internet shutdowns will freeze economic activity in affected areas and cause large-scale disruptions in economic output. India is estimated to have lost over 20,000 crore in 2020 because of Internet shutdowns. Despite the costs and inconveniences involved, the shutdowns, on very rare occasions, do become necessary evils. However, it is hard to classify the ones initiated by the Central government in recent years under those categories.

Internet bans should be a last resort and must be enforced following well-formulated protocols. Emergency response and relief systems for the vulnerable have to then work in parallel.

Upgrading cyber divisions of law enforcement agencies with new-age innovations may offer several alternatives. The use of some of these technologies, including mass surveillance systems and communication interceptors, also presents its own ethical dilemmas.

As the pace of globalisation, digitisation and connectivity accelerates, balancing civil liberties with security concerns will become an increasingly difficult task. Governments, especially in democracies, will have to create modern, independent institutions that have the authority and expertise to create frameworks that meet these challenges, without falling back on measures that result in state overreach.

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