Internet Shutdown And Democratic Governance In India

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Abstract

The Internet has become an indispensable part of our daily life in the World of 21st century. Anything happening in our world can be related to the internet, whether it is development, education, marketing, business, healthcare, etc. India is the largest democracy in the world which is known for its diverse culture and tradition. The constitution of India gives fundamental and human rights regarding free speech, freedom of the media, freedom of expression, Right to information, etc. which signifies features of democratic government. But, sometimes, the government ends up deliberately blocking the use of the internet by the citizens to maintain law and order and stop the spread of hate speech in case of an ethnic crisis or any other issues. The problem arises is that India witnessed 84 internet shutdowns in 2024 which is the 2nd highest in the world. Internet shutdown is an intentional disruption of internet communications for a specific population or within a location for any time of duration of time often to exert control over the flow of information. On this note, this paper is an attempt to explore the impacts of internet shutdown to the common people as well as the student communities of Manipur. The study used both primary and secondary sources. This paper uses a qualitative method based on a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The people of Manipur experienced various episodes of internet shutdown as ethnic conflict is still going on. This article talks about the direct and indirect impact of the internet shutdown on the student community of Manipur. The study finds that an Internet shutdown is a direct violation of the right to life and other fundamental rights. It impacts directly and indirectly on healthcare, the economy, business, education, and many other areas. The study recommends that internet shutdowns should be a last resort while keeping in mind the welfare of common people and should be kept minimal.

Keywords- Internet, Shutdown, Governance, Democracy.

Introduction:

In the recent times, India has experienced some major episodes of internet shutdown in the states of Rajasthan, Manipur and Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Though the reason behind often associates with maintaining law and order, to avoid spreading of wrong informations, rumours, it often impacts to the status of democracy that we are living. The provisions of Indian constitution includes a number of fundamental Rights to safeguard its citizens such as freedom of speech and expression, Right to information etc. Democracy and freedom are dependent variables. Regarding relationship between governance and democracy,

good governance is the ultimate goal of people elected government called democracy. This article is an attempt to analyse impacts given by internet shutdown to the very principles of democracy. Various secondary sources are analyse to write this article. Now let us try to understand meaning of the term 'Internet Shutdown'.

Internet Shutdown:

It can be said that there will be no one in today's generation that never heard the word Internet. It means the extensive global network of interconnected computers that enables communication and information[1] meanwhile the very word Shutdown means a situation where a company or large piece of equipment shuts down, usually temporarily[2] .So, internet shutdown simply means cutoff communication and information. Also "internet shutdown" generically refer to any deliberate action taken by the state to prevent people in a specific area from accessing the Internet, either completely or partially. During a total shutdown, the State shuts down all local internet access. The State may choose to implement one or more of the following measures during a partial shutdown: (i) restricting particular websites and material; (ii) interfering with internet access via some channels, such mobile networks, while allowing access to the internet via other channels, like wired broadband; and (iii) decreasing network speed, such as from 4G to 2G [3].

On the other hand, a deliberate disruption of Internet-based communications that renders them unavailable to a particular population, location, or access type is known as an Internet shutdown. Disabling access to the global Internet is frequently an attempt by the state to regulate the flow of information within a region. Internet shutdowns differ from content censorship/blocking or application-level censorship/blocking, which allows Internet connectivity but restricts access to specific websites or apps.[4] The importance of internet in a democracy is also reflected in the form of fundamental Rights in Indian constitution.

Democracy and related constitutional provisions:

India is known as the largest democracy in the world which is also most populated country in the world. The Preamble of the constitution embodies provisions of freedom and liberty of the citizens. The very purpose of article 19 of the Indian Constitution is violated as a result of internet shutdown. It is one of the important Fundamental Rights. For example, the freedom of speech and expression under article 19(1)(a) and freedom to practice any profession over the medium of the internet under Article 19(1)(g) as mentioned by the apex court in Anuradha Bhasin vs Union of India case 2020.Again in Raj Narain vs State of UP has declared Right to Information as fundamental right under article 19. Under article 21(Right to Life), Right to internet was also inserted as fundamental right by the Kerala High Court in Faheema Shirin vs State of Kerala case.[5] Let us delve into some of the important statistical data published related to internet shutdown.

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[1] *sharingCambridge University Press. (n.d.). Internet. In Cambridge English Dictionary. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from* *https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/internet*

[2] Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). *Shutdown*. In *Cambridge English Dictionary*. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/shutdown

[3]*Indian Journal of Law & Technology*. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://repository.nls.ac.in/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1293&context=ijlt

[4] Internet Society. (n.d.). *Internet Society position on Internet shutdowns*. Internet Society Pulse. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdown-statement

[5] Laxmikanth, M. (2023). Indian polity for civil services and other state examinations (7th ed.). McGraw Hill Education.

Some Statistical Data and Reports:

India is ranked 24th out of 33 countries in a recent global survey on support for free speech conducted by the independent U.S. think tank The Future of Free Speech. According to its report, "Who in the World Supports Free Speech?."[6] This position cannot be considered as good one for a democratic country like India.

Meanwhile, the 2024 edition of Freedom of the Net (FOTN) Report was released recently. This annual report is published by Freedom House which is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that focuses on the global expansion of freedom and democracy. This report offers a thorough assessment of internet freedom worldwide, complete with a ranking of nations, an overview of worldwide trends, and in-depth national analyses. Iceland maintained its ranking as the world's "freest online environment" with a score of 94 out of 100. With a score of 9 out of 100, China and Myanmar were tied for the lowest in the world. Meanwhile, with a score of 50 out of 100, India was classified as partly free.[7] Here, in this report India is not doing bad but the word partly doesn't suitable to a democratic country like India.

According to digital rights group connection Now, India cut internet connection 84 times last year, which is still the highest of any democratic nation, compared to 116 times in 2023. According to a research by digital rights group Access Now, India experienced the most internet shutdowns in 2024 that is 84 times among democratic countries, second only to Myanmar, which experienced 85 such blackouts enforced by the military regime there [8]. Consequently, Human rights are violated by all internet shutdowns. In situations where people are most vulnerable to violence, the effects are particularly severe. The causes of internet shutdown may be due to Protests, ongoing hostilities, exams, elections, political unrest, and other prominent national events continued to set off shutdowns.[9] This frequent shutdown episodes should not happen to a democratic country like India. These statistical data are important because of relevance of internet in our daily lives.

Importance of internet in today's digital era:

"There is a big song and dance about the internet being cut. Now, if you've reached the stage where you say an internet cut is more dangerous than the loss of human lives, then what can I say?"[10]

The above statement which was given by external affairs minister Jaishankar depicts carzyness of people when internet is shutdown. It is very much similar to snatch away of an element which is very important for our daily lives. The internet has become an essential part of contemporary life, changing the way we communicate, work, and learn. It provides instant access to a wealth of information resources speeds up communication through messaging and email, and serves as a platform for online learning. It has also transformed commerce by making digital transactions, online banking, and e-commerce possible. Additionally, it promoted relationships and the sharing of ideas by creating global social connections. The

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[6] **The Hindu**. (2025, March 19). *India ranked 24th out of 33 countries in free speech index*. The Hindu. Retrieved July 5, 2025, from https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-ranked-24th-out-of-33-countries-in-free-speech-index/article69345028.ece

[7] **Freedom House.** (n.d.). *Freedom on the Net*. Freedom House. Retrieved July 5, 2025, from https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net

[8] **Tech Desk. (2025, February 25).** *India saw 84 internet shutdowns in 2024, more than any other democracy: Report. Indian Express.* Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://indianexpress.com/article/technology/tech-news-technology/india-internet-shutdowns-2024-access-now-report-9853978/

[9] Access Now. (2022). *2022 KIO report: The return of digital authoritarianism* [PDF]. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2023/02/2022-KIO-Report-final.pdf

[10] Human Rights Watch & Internet Freedom Foundation. (2023, June 14). *"No Internet Means No Work, No Pay, No Food": Internet shutdowns deny access to basic rights in "Digital India"* [Report]. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/06/14/no-internet-means-no-work-no-pay-no-food/internet-shutdowns-deny-access-basic

internet is essential to healthcare because it makes it possible to quickly access patient data for more accurate diagnoses and to share the most recent findings in medical research and treatment recommendations. It facilitates telemedicine, enabling remote medical advice and consultations. All things considered, the internet propels advancement, ease, and connectedness in the development of contemporary daily life. [11]

Also, numerous people, institutions, and companies worldwide rely on Internet-based services that rely on vital operations like data processing, data storage, and international financial transactions. There will undoubtedly be large financial losses if access to these services is disrupted because productivity will decline. [12] Thus now a days internet becomes part and parcel of our life. In this regard mention may be made of the shocking remark of a 35-year-old Rajasthani Dalit mother of five that she is not working at the moment. When the internet is down, she is unable to get any money out of her account, receive any income, or even get food rations. [13]

In addition to being essential for freedom of expression and association, internet access is also necessary for accessing basic social and economic rights such as food, employment, health care, social security, and education. Shutdowns disproportionately impact low-income and remote communities in rural areas where mobile connectivity is the main option, as 94% of fixed-line internet is in urban centers. [14] Other than this we also can keep in our mind that the number of times that we use internet in a day. It can be anything related to entertainment, information, job applications, education, and academics, marketing, purchasing tickets, healthcare and so on.

According to the 2017 Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services regulations, which are a component of the Indian Telegraph Act of 1885, internet shutdowns are not prohibited in India. However, the Supreme Court may intervene if these shutdowns have major repercussions. In a historic decision in 2020, the Court ruled that having access to the internet is a basic right rather than a luxury. This came after the repeal of Article 370, which resulted in an internet blackout in Jammu and Kashmir[15]In addition to this look into implications on governance due to internet shutdown.

Governance and implications involved:

The term governance simply means process of managing or supervising the direction and control of anything like a nation or an organization or a government[16]. In today's world, the notion of e- governance is very popular one in the process of administration. It compels to have digitalisation as an important part of our life in which internet plays a very active role. From time to time, government of India have launched a number of policies and programmes via digital mode.

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[11] **Effect of Internet Shutdown on Postgraduate Trainees in Manipur: A Qualitative Study.** (2024). *Indian Journal of Medical Research*. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://ijmr.org.in/effect-of-internet-shutdown-on-postgraduate-trainees-in-manipur-a-qualitative-study/

[12] **Internet Society. (n.d.).** *Internet Society position on Internet shutdowns*. Internet Society Pulse. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdown-statement

[13] Human Rights Watch & Internet Freedom Foundation. (2023, June 14). *"No Internet Means No Work, No Pay, No Food": Internet shutdowns deny access to basic rights in "Digital India"* [Report]. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/06/14/no-internet-means-no-work-no-pay-no-food/internet-shutdowns-deny-access-basic

[14] Ibid.

[15] *Finshots. (2025, January 15). The economic costs of internet shutdowns. Finshots. Retrieved July 5, 2025, from https://finshots.in/archive/the-economic-costs-of-internet-shutdowns-india-government/*

[16] Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Governance*. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved July 8, 2025, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/governance

State governments have set up common service centers in villages to facilitate access to e-governance services. These centers help with things like bill payment, banking, Aadhaar registration, and acquiring official documents. Many people agree that having access to the internet is crucial to exercising a number of human rights guaranteed by the ICCPR(International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) and other international agreements that India abides by. States are required to protect the right to free speech, and limitations are only permitted when they are appropriate, necessary, and legal. However, because of their extensive and indiscriminate effects, widespread internet shutdowns usually fall short of this proportionality requirement[17].

That's largely because Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India has long advocated for a "Digital India" to revolutionize the nation's economy and spur growth. Over time, India has developed a vast, publicly accessible digital infrastructure that includes a biometric identity system, a digital payment interface that accepts QR code payments (which currently make up more than 70% of all non-cash retail payments in India), and an online data management system that houses IDs, tax records, and vaccination records. Choudhary argues that while the government encourages us all to live online, it also keeps a kill switch and frequently uses it. And when you do that, the entire social services and economy collapse [18].

But, the effectiveness of the government's flagship programs like "Digital India" initiative, which highlights the significance of regular internet access for providing essential public services, is undermined by the nation's widespread internet shutdowns since 2018, which are the highest in the world [19].

"India's reputation has been tainted by its frequent imposition of internet shutdowns, leading to the unfavourable label of 'The Internet Shutdown Capital of the World' and attracting nation. From mere 3 internet shutdowns in 2012 to peaking at 135 shutdowns in 2018, India's intolerance towards the right to internet access was visible in the passage of the last decade."

The statement reflects that the frequent episodes of internet shutdown makes India capital of Internet Shutdown in the world[20].The suspension of internet services and functionalities internet shutdown may be implemented and enforced in accordance with the State's powers in the areas of national integrity, security, inciting offenses, and public order. From May 3, 2023, to December 2023, Manipur experienced its longest internet outage, which lasted roughly 210 days. Ethnic violence between the Kuki-Zo and Meitei communities prompted this shutdown. India shut down the internet for more than 7,000 hours in 2023, with the longest outage occurring from May to December amid violence and ethnic clashes in Manipur.

According to the Union government, shutting down mobile Internet is a crucial tool in the toolbox for managing law and order situations [21]. But, Over the last five years, India has the unenviable distinction of imposing the most internet outages globally. This outage violates the rules established by the Supreme Court

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[17] . Human Rights Watch & Internet Freedom Foundation. (2023, June 14). *"No Internet Means No Work, No Pay, No Food": Internet shutdowns deny access to basic rights in "Digital India"* [Report]. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/06/14/no-internet-means-no-work-no-pay-no-food/internet-shutdowns-deny-access-basic

[18] **Time.** (2023, August 15). *How internet shutdowns wreak havoc in India. Time.* https://time.com/6304719/india-internet-shutdowns-manipur/
Retrieved July 6, 2025

[19] ET Online. (2023, June 14). *India's recurrent internet shutdowns threaten its own flagship digital initiative, hurt the vulnerable. The Economic Times.* Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/indias-recurrent-internet-shutdowns-threaten-its-own-flagship-digital-initiative-hurt-the-vulnerables/articleshow/100982550.cms

[20] **Shanker, A.** (2023). *The paradox of prevention: Individualistic aspect of internet shutdowns. NLIU Law Review, 12*(2), 73–95. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://nliulawreview.nliu.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Vol-XII-Issue-II-73-95.pdf

[21] The Hindu Editorial. (2024, October 9). *Blunt weapon On Internet shutdowns. The Hindu.* Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/blunt-weapon-on-internet-shutdowns/article69262680.ece

in 2020 for executive authorities to control internet suspension orders A non-governmental organization that advocates for digital rights and liberties, the Internet Freedom Foundation, has highlighted how the Manipur internet shutdown flagrantly breaches the Anuradha Bhasin guidelines[22] given by Supreme Court.

The apex Court declared in Anuradha Bhasin vs. Union of India that an arbitrary limitation on internet services was unlawful and that orders to shut down the internet had to meet the requirements of proportionality and necessity. When it decided in Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India that every shutdown must pass the proportionality and necessity requirements, the Supreme Court of India acknowledged this. Shutting down the internet affects people's ability to make a living, get healthcare, and receive an education. The government should at least assess its impact and use it carefully because it is a brutal weapon. For years, there has been pressure on the government to prepare such an assessment, but no progress has been achieved. When it comes to the Internet shutdowns index, India shouldn't want to be at the top of it [23].

At the same time, the Court established clear guidelines but did not forbid shutdowns. The justifications and duration of shutdown orders must be disclosed to the public. Additionally, it instructed governments to guarantee that, even in the event of a blackout, people could still access basic services like welfare programs [24].

As of 658 million Indians use the internet regularly, making up 47% of the country's total population, it has the second-largest online population, after China. Also in n 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021, India was the nation with the highest number of internet shutdowns [25].

The suspension of internet and telecom services was deemed an excessive measure with significant consequences for the general public, according to the 26th report of the Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology, which addressed Suspension of Telecom Services/Internet and its Impact[26].

Now, let us look some of the impacts of internet shutdown. According to Top10VPN's Global Cost of Internet Shutdowns report, losses worldwide were projected to reach $7.69 billion in 2024. Nearly $320 million of that total came from India alone. Things were even worse in 2020. India was responsible for an astounding $2.8 billion, or 75%, of the $4 billion worldwide loss[27]. If this episodes of internet shutdown are going on in the future then dream of India to achieve third largest economy by 2027-28 can be bizzare.

[22] Bhalla, V. (2023, July 22). *Why India leads the world in internet shutdowns: Open violations of SC guidelines, silent judiciary*. Scroll.in. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://scroll.in/article/1052802/why-india-leads-the-world-in-internet-shutdowns-open-violations-of-sc-guidelines-silent-judiciary scroll.in+6

[23] The Hindu Editorial. (2024, October 9). *Blunt weapon On Internet shutdowns*. The Hindu. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/blunt-weapon-on-internet-shutdowns/article69262680.ece

[24] *Finshots. (2025, January 15). The economic costs of internet shutdowns. Finshots. Retrieved July 5, 2025, from https://finshots.in/archive/the-economic-costs-of-internet-shutdowns-india-government/*

[25] Ibid.

[26] **Shanker, A.** (2023). *The paradox of prevention: Individualistic aspect of internet shutdowns. NLIU Law Review, 12*(2), 73–95. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://nliulawreview.nliu.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Vol-XII-Issue-II-73-95.pdf

[27] *Finshots. (2025, January 15). The economic costs of internet shutdowns. Finshots. Retrieved July 5, 2025, from https://finshots.in/archive/the-economic-costs-of-internet-shutdowns-india-government/*

Concluding Remark:

No doubt, internet has become an indispensable part of our everyday lives. Our lives are made easier, quicker, and simpler when the internet provides us with data, facts, and information that aids in our social, economic, and personal growth. But, as a responsible citizen, it is also our duty to use this application in right way.

We all know that t is impossible to separate people from the internet in this age of digital connectivity. In light of the developing collective consciousness in favour of the internet, suitable alternatives would be relied over strict imposition of shutdowns in the future.

There is need for more campaigns like KeepItOn campaign[28] which was initiated by Global groups and initiatives to stop internet shutdowns. It will help to enhance more awareness to the people regarding this field.

In the words of **Jayshree Bajoria,** Associate Asia Director at Human Rights Watch, commented, "In the age of 'Digital India,' where the government has pushed to make internet fundamental to every aspect of life, the authorities instead use internet shutdowns as a default policing measure. Cutting off access to the internet should be the absolute last resort with safeguards to ensure people aren't deprived of their livelihoods and basic rights." Regardless of internet access, the government should guarantee that all citizens have access to social protection programs and government initiatives. Digital India should make sure that technology is utilized to uphold, not undermine, people's rights and means of subsistence.

Finally, without a reliable online space where people can freely express themselves and have access to a wide range of information, a robust democracy in the twenty-first century cannot exist. By upholding these fundamental rights, people can use the internet in a safe and unrestricted manner to discuss important social issues, start civic movements, evaluate the performance of businesses and the government, and debate and come to an agreement on these issues. Therefore, maintaining internet freedom globally necessitates a renewed and ongoing commitment to defending democracy in its broadest sense.

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[28] Access Now. (2022). *2022 KIO report: The return of digital authoritarianism* [PDF]. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2023/02/2022-KIO-Report-final.pdf.There is need of such kind of initiatives in future.