

ISSN: 2583-8725

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Quarterly Online and Print Edition

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**LEX SCRIPTA MAGAZINE OF  
LAW AND POLICY (VOL-4, ISSUE-1)**

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ISSN-2583-8725

Vol - IV, Issue - I

Published by INTEGRITY EDUCATION INDIA

**New Delhi**

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Padam Chand Marg, Daryaganj,  
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Printed in India @ New Delhi

ISSN: 2583-8725

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## Constitutional Validity of Internet Shutdowns in India

Author  
Preeti Yadav



# Constitutional Validity of Internet Shutdowns in India

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## **Abstract**

*Use of the internet is now an indispensable element of contemporary society, serving an important function in relation to communication, learning, business, administration, health care, and exercising the rights of democracy. Internet shutdowns have increased in the recent past due to Indian government officials' efforts to ensure public order, safety, and security in the country.*

*The aim of this research paper is to study whether there exists any constitutional legitimacy to the internet shutdowns in India. For this purpose, this research paper will examine the legal and constitutional aspects of the imposition of internet shutdowns in India. The powers utilized through the provisions of statutes like Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services Rules, 2017 will be studied in this context to assess its constitutionality with reference to fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of India. The specific focus of this research paper will remain on the consequences of internet shutdowns on freedom of expression under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India, freedom of trade and profession under Article 19(1)(g) of the Constitution of India, and digital rights.*

*It can be concluded from the discussion presented above that internet shutdowns may sometimes be inevitable due to exigencies of the situation but the misuse of such power for no valid reason goes against the constitutional principles of democracy.*

**Keywords:** *Internet Shutdowns, Constitutional Law, Fundamental Rights, Freedom of Expression, Digital Rights, National Security, Public Order, Judicial Review, India.*

## **Introduction**

### **Meaning and Concept of Internet Shutdowns**

Internet shutdown means the deliberate disruption of internet and telecommunication services by government bodies within a defined geographic location or at a specified time frame. Internet shutdown may be either total blockade of internet access or restriction of internet services, sites, social networking sites, and/or cell phone services. Internet shutdowns are normally enforced in cases of public disturbances, political unrest, communal violence, strikes, exams, or security

reasons.<sup>1</sup> Recent years have seen the rise of internet shutdowns as a significant legal and constitutional issue due to the close relation between internet usage and communication, education, economic transactions, journalism, and the exchange of information. This is because contemporary democratic states have become increasingly dependent on the internet.

### **Growth of Digital Dependency in India**

Rapid advancement of digitization in India can be attributed to greater internet use, smartphones, digital payments, distance learning, e-government services, and social networking sites. Initiatives by the government, including Digital India, have been instrumental in promoting innovation and online reach in the nation. Internet usage today is fundamental for conducting business, making transactions in the banking system, receiving healthcare facilities, searching for jobs, conducting governance activities, and maintaining personal contacts.<sup>2</sup>

Internet connectivity became extremely important during the times of the coronavirus pandemic, where educational institutions, offices, and government departments moved to virtual space for the safety of individuals. Internet usage in the current scenario cannot be considered merely as technological usage; rather, it has become the means through which constitutional rights can be exercised. Thus, any long-term disruption of internet connectivity creates serious implications.

### **Need and Purpose of Internet Restrictions**

The reasons usually cited by the governments for shutting down the internet include issues related to national security, maintaining public order, preventing violence, and managing misinformation. Restrictions are imposed in cases where there is tension among communities, riots, terrorism, political unrest, or any other kind of emergency, to ensure that inflammatory materials are not circulated. Internet shutdowns are considered precautionary measures in order to avoid coordinating activities that are against the law and the aggravation of conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

However, in certain instances, such actions can be justified for the sake of public interest. But questions come up regarding the misuse and arbitrary nature of these restrictions. The use of an overgeneralized policy like internet restriction affects many innocent individuals as well as economic activities and democratic rights.

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<sup>1</sup> Pant, Kostubh. "Analysis Internet Shutdowns; Fundamental Right; Judiciary; Reasonable Restrictions; Constitutional Validity." *Issue 6 Indian JL & Legal Rsch.* 4 (2022): 1.

<sup>2</sup> Tripathi, Utkarsh. "Internet Shutdowns vis-a-vis Freedom of Speech and Expression." *Part 2 Indian J. Integrated Rsch. L.* 3 (2023): 1.

<sup>3</sup> Malik, Taniya. "Freedom of internet and state control: a case study on internet shutdowns in India." *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology* 19.2 (2025): 97-126.

## **Constitutional Perspective on Freedom and State Security**

Various Fundamental Rights of India as laid down in the Constitution are directly related to internet shutdowns. Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression as mentioned in Article 19(1)(a), Right to Freedom to Practice Trade and Profession as per Article 19(1)(g), and the Right to Life and Personal Liberty provided for under Article 21 are directly associated with internet access in the present day world.<sup>4</sup>

However, the Indian Constitution also allows for certain restrictions to be placed on Fundamental Rights on grounds of sovereignty, security of the State, public order, and unity and integrity of the Nation. Thus, the concept of internet shutdown is one where there exists a balance between individual rights and the obligation of the State to ensure national security. Constitutionality of internet shutdowns will depend entirely upon the satisfaction of various elements such as legality, necessity, proportionality, and reasonableness. Modern day courts have reiterated on several occasions that although powers have been granted to the State in relation to national security, these powers must not be abused nor used arbitrarily.

## **Legal Framework Governing Internet Shutdowns in India**

- **Constitutional Provisions Involved**

Internet shutdowns have mainly been questioned from the perspective of whether they are constitutional with regard to fundamental rights enshrined within the Indian constitution. Despite the fact that internet access is not mentioned as one of the fundamental rights in the constitution, judicial interpretation shows that internet access has become an integral part of different fundamental rights as per the Indian constitution.<sup>5</sup> Fundamental Right No. 19(1)(a) enshrines the freedom of speech and expression, which includes the right to express oneself through the internet. In addition to this, Fundamental Right No. 19(1)(g) covers the right to follow any profession, conduct business, and occupy oneself with some work. This means that there are various professions that cannot be conducted without internet access.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to that, Article 21 grants a fundamental right to life and personal liberty, which, in the opinion of the judiciary, includes the right to live with honor as well as having access to modes of communication that are necessary for an individual. Nevertheless, these rights are subject to limitations as per Article 19(2). The Constitution allows the State to impose reasonable restrictions on those rights in

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<sup>4</sup> Malik, Taniya. "Freedom of internet and state control: a case study on internet shutdowns in India." *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology* 19.2 (2025): 97-126.

<sup>5</sup> Naruka, Yash Singh. "Balancing Cyber Liberties and National Interests: Examining India's Internet Freedom Landscape." *Issue 1 Indian JL & Legal Rsch.* 5 (2023): 1.

<sup>6</sup> Lone, Wasiq. "The Functional Contraction of Article 19 (1)(a): Freedom of Speech in the Age of National Security and Digital Surveillance." *Available at SSRN 5680363* (2025).

respect of matters that touch upon the issues of sovereignty, integrity of India, security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, and offenses.

- **Section 144 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 and Earlier Use under CrPC**

Prior to the advent of telecom suspension regulations, the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 was used regularly by the authorities to impose bans on telecommunications. Under Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, the Executive Magistrate had the authority to impose an urgent order in case of annoyance, apprehended danger, or threat to the peace of the community. This authority was utilized generally to ban communication services when there was unrest or tension in the society. However, under the current legal regime, the Code of Criminal Procedure has been substituted with the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023. Similar powers have been delegated to the executive for issuing urgent orders in order to prevent disturbances and maintain public peace. Nevertheless, it has been noted repeatedly that the said provisions may have been misused to place bans on internet services.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear from judicial pronouncements that there can be no arbitrary exercise of preventive powers; rather, they need to continue to remain under the constraints of the Constitution. The restrictions imposed through them need to be transient, proportional, and based on real necessity.

- **Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services Rules, 2017**

The main set of rules applicable to internet shutdowns is laid out in the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules, 2017 made under the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885. The main idea of the Rules is the possibility of suspending telecom services, including the internet, in cases where there are any public emergencies or questions about public safety.<sup>8</sup>

According to these rules, orders of internet suspension may be issued by the Secretary to the Government of the Ministry of Home Affairs on a national level or the Home Department of the respective state governments. In exceptional cases, it is allowed to give temporary orders to authorized officers which would then be later confirmed.<sup>9</sup> The Rules further contain the creation of the mechanism of Review Committees who shall check if orders correspond to the law. Nevertheless, even though there are certain rules in place, some doubts remain regarding the lack of transparency, reasoning in orders, and public accountability in this matter. Also, it

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<sup>7</sup> Mishra, Ankur. "The Right to Internet: A Fundamental Delusion." *LawFoyer Int'l J. Doctrinal Legal Rsch.* 2 (2024): 898.

<sup>8</sup> Grover, Rohan. "Contingent connectivity: Internet shutdowns and the infrastructural precarity of digital citizenship." *new media & society* 27.1 (2025): 359-378.

<sup>9</sup> Ruijgrok, Kris. "The authoritarian practice of issuing internet shutdowns in India: The Bharatiya Janata Party's direct and indirect responsibility." *Democratization* 29.4 (2022): 611-633.

can be said that frequent internet shutdowns might go beyond temporary measures provided in the Rules.

- **Role of the Ministry of Home Affairs and State Authorities**

The ability to enforce internet blackouts in India lies with the executive authorities both at the central and state levels. The Ministry of Home Affairs is at the forefront in directing directions relating to the suspension of telecommunications in cases involving national security, public emergency, and law and order considerations. State Governments, through the concerned Home Department and districts, can also issue directives in regard to restrictions of the use of the internet facilities.

State-level executives have regularly been involved in enforcing blackouts in times of communal tension, political agitations, examination periods, and local security issues. District Magistrates and police executives usually have an important role in determining the threats to law and order and making recommendations concerning preventive action.<sup>10</sup>

Concentration of these powers in executives has led to constitutional fears of abuse since the standards guiding decision-making are rather vague and wide. As a result, judicial decisions in recent times have stressed the necessity for periodic reviews and publication of orders. Compliance with the rule of law is another important requirement.

## **Fundamental Rights and Internet Shutdowns**

- **Freedom of Speech and Expression under Article 19(1)(a)**

The right to freedom of speech and expression guaranteed by article 19(1)(a) of the Indian constitution is another fundamental right that is adversely affected by internet shutdowns. Given the digital age we are living in, the internet has become the main means of communication, sharing thoughts and views, accessing news, and engaging in public discourse. With the use of social media and online news websites, anyone can freely express his thoughts.

In other words, internet shutdowns are a hindrance to the free flow of communications and exchange of information through online networks. Even journalists, students, political activists, and regular people are prevented from exercising their right to freedom of expression when such shutdowns last for extended periods of time. The courts have made it clear that the freedom of expression using the internet is an essential component of our constitutional freedoms.

- **Freedom to Practice Trade and Profession under Article 19(1)(g)**

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<sup>10</sup> Subramanian, Ramesh. "Media and Internet Censorship in India: A Study of its History and Political-Economy." *Journal of International Technology and Information Management* 33.1 (2024): 1-47.

Article 19(1)(g) protects the right of the person concerned to practice any profession, carry out any occupation, trade, or business. With technological advancements, commercial activities rely heavily on connectivity through the internet and conducting transactions online. In this regard, an internet blackout can affect businesses, banks, freelancers, online educational institutes, and entrepreneurs.<sup>11</sup> Such internet blackouts may affect economic freedom in the sense that they may affect business operations, thus affecting livelihoods of people involved in commercial ventures. Small traders and entrepreneurs suffer greatly due to internet blackouts. As a result, such blackouts can negatively affect people's livelihoods and jobs.

- **Right to Privacy and Access to Information**

Privacy rights, according to the Supreme Court's view of Article 21, are also related to internet services and communication rights. The internet provides a crucial medium for interactions of a personal nature, learning, health care, and the acquisition of information. The denial of internet services would make it difficult for people to acquire vital information, as well as participate effectively in society and its various activities.<sup>12</sup>

Information access becomes extremely relevant in democratic states because the citizens require the digital media to raise awareness, obtain information on governmental affairs, and actively participate in the democratic process. People who do not have access to the internet might find it hard to access emergency services, educational material, financial institutions, and information provided by the government.

- **Reasonable Restrictions under Article 19(2)**

Fundamental Rights may enjoy constitutional protection but are not absolute and can be subjected to certain limitations or reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2) in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of India, security of the State, public order, decency, morality, and prevention of offences.

While internet shutdowns in the name of national security, public safety, or prevention of any form of violence or misinformation may appear justified on the part of the government, yet they must adhere to certain principles of necessity, proportionality, and reasonableness. In other words, any shutdown of internet access covering a vast number of individuals may not be in keeping with the constitutional principles. The courts have consistently maintained that any restriction imposed on internet access must neither be arbitrary nor disproportionate. There should always

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<sup>11</sup> Singh, Dr Pyar. "An Analysis of the Article 19 (1)(a) and Article 19 (2) of the Indian Constitution and Distorting Form of Freedom of Speech and Expression in the Era of Social Media in India." *Available at SSRN 5100601* (2025).

<sup>12</sup> Karpiuk, Miroslaw. "The Protection of State Security in Cyberspace as a Justifying Ground for Restricting Constitutional Freedoms and Rights." *Przegląd Prawa Konstytucyjnego* 3 (67 (2022): 401-412.

be a legitimate objective behind it. The same must also be backed by law and limited to only what is essential in relation to a particular public order or security matter.

### **Judicial Interpretation and Landmark Cases**

- **Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India**<sup>13</sup>

In this historic judgment, the Supreme Court said that the right to freedom of speech and expression, as well as the right to conduct business over the internet, are included in the rights granted by Article 19 of the Indian Constitution. The court declared that internet blackouts can't be indefinite and have to pass the test of necessity and proportionality.<sup>14</sup>

- **Faheema Shirin v. State of Kerala**<sup>15</sup>

The Kerala High Court recognized internet access as an important part of the right to education and the right to privacy under Article 21. The judgment highlighted the growing importance of internet connectivity in modern life and emphasized that unreasonable restrictions on internet access may violate fundamental rights.

- **Judicial Review of Executive Powers**

The judiciary plays an important role in reviewing internet shutdown orders issued by executive authorities. Courts examine whether such restrictions are lawful, reasonable, and necessary for maintaining public order or national security. Judicial review acts as a safeguard against arbitrary exercise of power.

- **Principles of Proportionality and Necessity**

The need for adherence to principles of proportionality and necessity in respect to internet shutdown has been recognized by courts. Such restrictions can only be put into effect when circumstances demand their use temporarily. Authorities must ensure that restrictions imposed are proportional to the problem being addressed.

### **Constitutional Validity of Internet Shutdowns**

- **National Security and Public Order Justifications**

The state usually provides reasons for implementing the internet blockade on grounds of national security and maintaining public peace and safety. These measures can be imposed by the concerned authorities in the event of riots, terrorism, communal clashes, and political disturbances to avoid spreading rumors. At times, the internet can also be banned temporarily in emergencies to ensure public safety and peace.<sup>16</sup>

- **Test of Reasonableness and Proportionality**

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<sup>13</sup> *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India*, (2020) 3 SCC 637.

<sup>14</sup> Juyal, Rebant. "Constitutional liberties and cyberspace: Analysing the Anuradha Bhasin v Union of India Case and its impact on fundamental rights." *Legal Information Management* 23.4 (2023): 276-281.

<sup>15</sup> *Faheema Shirin R.K. v. State of Kerala*, 2020 SCC OnLine Ker 2976.

<sup>16</sup> Pant, Kostubh. "Analysis Internet Shutdowns; Fundamental Right; Judiciary; Reasonable Restrictions; Constitutional Validity." *Issue 6 Indian JL & Legal Rsch.* 4 (2022): 1.

Constitutional justification for internet shutdowns can be derived from the reasonableness and proportionality of the restrictions. According to the courts, restrictions on rights need to have a proper purpose and must not be excessive than what is required to attain the said purpose. In this regard, unrestricted or indefinite shutdowns are considered as disproportionate.

- **Balancing Fundamental Rights and State Interests**

The act of Internet censorship is an attempt at balancing personal liberties and those of the State. Inasmuch as people have fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, commerce, privacy, and access to information, the State has its role to ensure security and stability. Thus, any form of restriction should be within the limits of legality and necessity.

- **Issues of Arbitrary and Excessive Use**

Among the many issues that arise out of such actions as shutting down the internet is the fact that these shutdowns can be used in an unreasonable and excessive manner by executives. There is a possibility that these shutdowns will interfere with education, commerce, healthcare, the media, and communication. This makes it even more likely that there will be an abuse of power.

## **Impact of Internet Shutdowns**

- **Economic and Business Impact**

The internet ban affects various business activities. Activities such as online banking, online transactions, ecommerce transactions, and the overall process of communication come to a standstill in such situations, resulting in losses for the concerned entities. Smaller businesses and technologically-oriented industries are most impacted because of their reliance on internet connectivity.<sup>17</sup>

- **Impact on Education and Healthcare**

Access to the Internet has now become crucial for online learning, research, and health care services like telemedicine. Shutdowns hinder the process of virtual classes, tests, and access to learning material. As far as the health care industry is concerned, they can impact emergency communication as well.<sup>18</sup>

- **Effect on Media, Journalism, and Democracy**

Internet blackouts have direct impacts on press freedom and the exchange of information. The journalists might find it hard to report on various issues, verify the facts as well as communicate with the masses. Internet blackouts will also impact

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<sup>17</sup> Gosztonyi, Gergely. "The Regulation of Internet Access Restrictions in India in the Light of Judicial Practice." *In Medias Res* (2024): 166.

<sup>18</sup> Arya, Nitish Kumar, and Kumari Abha. "Legal Aspects and Socio-Economic Impact of Internet Shutdowns in India."

public debate, transparency, and democratic participation, thus affecting freedom of expression in a democracy.

- **Social and Human Rights Concerns**

Internet shutdowns pose several significant social and human rights questions. Restricting communications can alienate individuals and groups, interrupt daily activities, and reduce access to crucial information and other resources. In addition, internet shutdowns can have implications for privacy, free speech, and opportunities in today's increasingly digital environment.

## **Challenges and Need for Reform**

- **Lack of Transparency and Accountability**

Among the many challenges associated with internet blackouts in India, the opacity in the decision-making process is one of the main ones. The information regarding orders of internet shutdowns is generally not accessible to the public, and there may also be insufficient reasons provided by the authorities for such an action.

- **Need for Judicial Oversight**

In order to make sure that there is a balance between legality and constitutionality, judicial oversight is required. The judiciary is involved in checking the legality of actions taken under such a measure. They must see if the measures are proportional, reasonable, and necessary.

- **Safeguards Against Misuse of Power**

It has become essential to ensure that there are procedural protections that can help prevent internet shut down being arbitrary and indefinite in duration. It is important that any restrictions are made in rare cases and for limited periods of time.<sup>19</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Internet shutdowns have emerged as one of the most controversial constitutional questions in the era of digitization. Specifically, in countries like India where the right to internet has become an important aspect of life due to its significance in communication, education, business, governance, and democracy, the debate around internet shutdowns remains highly contentious. Even though the government has the power to temporarily restrict internet access during matters of national security, public order, and public safety, such power has to be used with caution and not in an arbitrary manner. In this context, the constitutional legality of the internet shutdowns will depend upon the legality, necessity, reasonableness, and proportionality of such actions. Judicial precedent has played an important role in ensuring that internet access is guaranteed as a prerequisite for exercising constitutional rights as per

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<sup>19</sup> Sharma, Aishwarya. "The Evolving Landscape of Online Content Regulation in India: Problems, Challenges, and Legal Perspectives." *Issue 6 Int'l JL Mgmt. & Human.* 7 (2024): 2258.

Article 19. However, repeated internet shutdowns pose serious challenges related to freedom of expression, economic activities, education, freedom of media, and human rights. Thus, a balance needs to be struck between securing state interest and maintaining constitutional liberties. The use of internet restrictions as a policy measure should be rare and subjected to judicial scrutiny.

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