



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

FROM DIGITAL MOBILIZATION TO DISCONNECTED DISSENT: THE STATE'S STRATEGIC USE OF INTERNET SHUTDOWN IN INDIA

Sivani Brahma Baruah

Guest Faculty Member, Department of Political Science,
Gyanpeeth Degree College, Baksa, Assam, India

Affiliated to Bodoland University, Kokrajhar, Assam, India

Abstract

India's expanding digital sphere is transforming the nature of individual participation in politics, and movements like #MeTooIndia, #DalitLivesMatter, #SaveArrey, the JNU protest, Anti-CAA Protest, the Farmers' protest, and others are reaching ever wider audiences. Yet this online empowerment of citizens is persistently challenged by recurring network disruptions, particularly during periods of civil unrest. While the administration argues that such connectivity blackouts are essential for maintaining law and order, there is growing concern over their impact on grassroots mobilization. This paper examines internet shutdowns not merely as administrative measures but as deliberate instruments of governance that reshape contentious political activity in the country. The research employs qualitative content analysis of secondary sources to evaluate the consequences of these blackouts on digital activism and to contribute to the broader discourse on democracy and state authority.

Keywords

Internet Shutdowns, Digital Activism, Digital Authoritarianism, Contentious Politics, Democratic Accountability, Social Movements

I. Introduction

India's democratic scenario has witnessed a major shift with the arrival of digital technologies, which have dramatically altered the scope of political engagement. Social media and mobile devices have given rise to a new wave of activism, allowing individuals to transcend geographical and social boundaries in the pursuit of justice. Movements such as #MeTooIndia have inspired survivors of sexual assault to challenge systemic oppression, while #DalitLivesMatter has provided a vital platform for Dalits to advocate for equality. These movements relied heavily on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to amplify personal testimonies and bypass traditional media gatekeeping. The 2020-2021 farmers' protests further demonstrate this shift, as digital tools allowed local concerns to reach the international community, garnering

global solidarity. With 958 million active internet users in 2025 (IAMAI & Kantar, 2026), India's digital landscape has become a vibrant arena for political expression and growth.

However, this digital promise is mitigated by significant vulnerabilities, including surveillance, misinformation, and censorship. Of particular concern is the frequency of internet shutdowns, which casts a long shadow over the country's digital progress. While the government often cites public safety and the prevention of unrest as justifications, India consistently ranks among the top global offenders for connectivity disruptions. Evidence suggests these actions often coincide with periods of intense public discontent, such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests in 2019 and the ethnic tensions in Manipur since 2023. These are not mere technical hiccups; they represent deliberate state interventions into the infrastructure of modern protest. It is a profound paradox that a democracy constitutionally committed to protecting freedom of speech and assembly under Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(b) utilizes such restrictive measures with such regularity.

This paper examines the issue of internet shutdowns not in the form of technical problems but rather as a means of governance that alters the form of digital dissent in India. To achieve this, the paper is divided into sections that examine literature related to digital activism and contentious politics, the reasons given by the government for such shutdowns, and the effects of such shutdowns on the margins and the repertoire of protests.

II. Literature Review

Digital activism has emerged as an integral part of the political landscape in India. However, its dependence on digital infrastructure has made it vulnerable to government actions such as internet shutdowns. According to researchers, the power of digital activism lies in its transformative nature, which reduces the costs of mobilization and allows marginalized groups to make their voices heard (Tufekci, 2017). As IAMAI-Kantar reports continue to show a surging user base nearing a billion, the frequency of shutdowns discussed in the introduction remains a persistent counter-trend. The power of digital activism has also been witnessed in the Nirbhaya movement, which, in 2012, was able to achieve national visibility for the cause of gender justice. Other movements, such as #MeTooIndia and #DalitLivesMatter, have also used social media to articulate the grievances of the disenfranchised, such as women and Dalits, respectively (Thomas & Bhatia, 2021).

Researchers, however, also caution that one should not be overly optimistic. The specter of "slacktivism" still looms large. This refers to the phenomenon in which online activism does not translate into actual political changes (Nayar, 2022). Rao (2023), in this regard, has noted that the nature of digital media is to have ephemeral cycles of engagement that are based on emotions. In one study that focused on Indian youth, researchers found that there was a significant gap in terms of actual engagement in digital activism. In the study, it was noted that while 93.5% of the youth are active on social media, only about 23.9% of them engage in actual digital activism due to their concerns about being harassed and their lack of digital literacy.

The transnational dimension of Indian activism constitutes another significant issue. The platforms used during the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests of 2019-2020 helped connect local activists with the global diaspora, which brought international attention to the issue. Similarly, the farmers' protests of 2020-2021 used digital platforms to amplify the perspectives of the people in the rural areas, but the efforts of the state restricted this. This shows the decentralized public sphere where local people are trying to challenge power but are vulnerable to the concept of digital authoritarianism.

The relationship between digital authoritarianism and internet shutdowns as an instrument of governance is clear. Following the thesis by Howard & Hussain (2013) that states are capable of repurposing liberatory technologies in the service of oppression, recent studies on the Indian case suggest that the state is not just responding to the challenge of digital dissent but also actively constructing the digital landscape. As highlighted by Human Rights Watch (2023), in doing so, India follows the new world trend in the development of 'digital authoritarianism,' in which the democratic veneer conceals the exploitation of the

underlying digital infrastructure to silence the periphery and further the divide between the marginalized and the center.

III. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theory of contentious politics (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) and the concept of digital authoritarianism (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Internet shutdowns are conceptualized here as a form of “infrastructural power” (Mann, 1984) that disrupts “mobilizing structures” (McAdam et al., 1996) while forcing social movements into adaptive “repertoires of contention” (Tilly, 1995). In the Indian context, these shutdowns exemplify how electoral democracies can adopt authoritarian digital strategies without fully abandoning democratic institutions, creating what scholars term “hybrid regimes” (Diamond, 2002).

IV. Statement of the Problem

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has opened new avenues for dissent in India, yet recurring internet shutdowns expose a fundamental tension between state authority and democratic freedoms. While the government justifies shutdowns as necessary for public order, their deployment during protest movements suggests a deliberate strategy to dismantle the infrastructure of collective action. This study addresses the under-recognition of internet shutdowns as calculated tools that weaken activism by disrupting communication, thereby threatening the sustainability of digital participation in India’s democracy.

V. Research Objectives

1. To examine how internet shutdowns are used as deliberate instruments of governance and political control in India.
2. To evaluate the social and economic consequences of internet shutdowns and their disproportionate impact on marginalized communities.
3. To explore the adaptive strategies and hybrid methods employed by activists to maintain mobilization under connectivity restrictions.

VI. Research Questions

1. How do official justifications for internet shutdowns align with their actual timing, duration, and outcomes in India?
2. What are the social and economic consequences of internet shutdowns, and how do they disproportionately impact marginalized communities compared to urban populations?
3. How do activists adapt to connectivity restrictions, and what limits their effectiveness in sustaining digital dissent?

VII. Significance of the Study

The importance of this research is that it offers a critical perspective through which internet shutdowns could be re-evaluated as a calculated tool of statecraft rather than an unintended administrative blip. By locating India’s experience within the global discourse on digital authoritarianism, this research has significant theoretical implications for scholars seeking to understand how electoral democracies balance the dialectics of technological advancement and political control. In practice, it emphasizes the constitutional implications of digital siloing and the imperative for transparency in digital governance. Ultimately, this research is a critical intervention aimed at ensuring India’s digital future is not obscured by calculated management, making it an indispensable resource for policymakers, legal advocates, and digital rights movements.

VIII. Methodology

The research design for the present research is qualitative content analysis. The data for the research has been collected from different research studies, government notifications published through government gazettes, authentic news reports, and digital rights reports published by Access Now, Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), SFLC.in, and Human Rights Watch, etc. Internet Shutdowns Tracker (internetshutdowns.in) and the STOP dataset have been used.

A deductive-inductive approach with pre-defined codes (e.g., justification, duration, impact on mobilization, adaptive strategies) guided the analysis.

The limitations of the research are the possibility of reporting bias from secondary sources. Future research can adopt an ethnographic method. All sources are used ethically.

IX. Discussion

IX. 1 Internet Shutdowns as Instruments of State Power

In the official narrative, internet shutdowns are justified as a precautionary measure for the maintenance of law and order in the country. The government usually cites the grounds of national security, preservation of public order to avoid civil strife, and the spread of misinformation as the reasons for internet shutdowns. These grounds are backed by the Telecommunications (Temporary Suspension of Services) Rules, 2024, which amend the Telecommunications Act, 2023, replacing the Indian Telegraph Act of 1885. The rules enable the central and state governments to suspend services as deemed necessary but only after a proportionate and reasonable decision-making process. Although proportionality is ensured through this mechanism, recurring long-term shutdowns test the commitment of the state to its legal standards.

While proponents argue that shutdowns have helped de-escalate violence in specific instances (e.g., during ethnic clashes), evidence from independent trackers shows limited correlation with reduced casualties and frequent overuse beyond immediate threats.

In practice, the internet shutdowns seem to be more aligned with the political situation than the actual regulations. After the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, Jammu and Kashmir faced the longest internet shutdown in a democracy, with full or partial internet services suspended for 552 days until early 2021. It was justified on the basis that it was imperative to prevent unrest, but the long duration seemed to indicate a more comprehensive strategy of containment. In Assam, mobile internet shutdowns were ordered for nine days in December 2019 following protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act. The Gauhati High Court observed that such blanket bans on internet services brought normal life to a standstill. Similarly, in Manipur, repeated and prolonged shutdowns were ordered in 2023 following ethnic violence between Meitei and Kuki-Zo populations, which resulted in over 250 casualties and displaced more than 60,000 individuals. One such statewide shutdown lasted for approximately 200 days, greatly impeding documentation and access to essential services. Such actions underscore the fundamental conflict between constitutional provisions for freedom of speech and the state's capacity to declare exceptional circumstances. By consistently prioritizing control, they reveal how democratic institutions can be leveraged to curtail meaningful participation and engagement.

IX. 2 Disrupting Collective Action and Protest Mobilisation

Contemporary Indian social movements increasingly rely on digital technology as an essential part of their operations. Hashtag movements such as #RejectCAA during the anti-CAA protests demonstrate how online activism amplifies concerns that might otherwise remain marginal. Shutdowns cause significant disruptions in such operations. The suspension of mobile internet services during the anti-CAA protests, for instance, caused severe disorganization among activists who relied on WhatsApp groups and Twitter threads for real-

time coordination, illustrating how connectivity blackouts directly fragment the organizational backbone of movements.

The 2020-2021 farmers' protests similarly illustrate this pattern. Following the Republic Day 2021 clashes, internet shutdowns were enforced at the Delhi borders and parts of Haryana, severing the digital coordination networks that had sustained the movement for months.

From the perspective of contentious politics, internet shutdowns are seen as disruptions in the "mobilizing structures" of social movements. They produce uncertainty, disrupt coordination, and undermine the movement through the fear of surveillance. The social movement, which thrives on the speed of the internet, is now forced to operate in a slower and weaker manner.

IX. 3 Unequal Impacts: Marginalisation and the Digital Divide

The impact of the shutdowns also varies in different sections of society, with the elite in the major cities having the knowledge or alternative infrastructure (such as wired broadband) to stay online, while the common people in the villages are in a state of total information darkness. In the case of the Manipur conflict of 2023, the information blackout, which was already unprecedented in its duration, moved beyond the realm of politics to become a challenge to the survival of the people in the region. Cutting off the digital connection resulted in the shutdown of the flow of aid and the silence on the issue of the violation of human rights by the perpetrators in the region, thereby increasing the trauma of the people who were already displaced due to ethnic conflict.

Similarly, in the case of Kashmir, the lifeline nature of the internet has created a situation where the suspension of the internet can be seen as a form of collective penalty. In addition to the 552 days mentioned above, the overall impact on the citizenry of Kashmir has been the decoupling of the people of the region from the modern economy and education resources simply for the mere possibility of unrest. These regional crises are indicative of a larger national trend where connectivity is no longer a luxury but a prerequisite for survival, as described in a Human Rights Watch and Internet Freedom Foundation report, "No Internet Means No Work, No Pay, No Food" (2023). This report demonstrates a "digital catch-22" in that, as the Indian state increasingly digitalizes essential public services, including the MGNREGA wage scheme and the Public Distribution System for food grains, internet shutdowns literally deny the poor their right to work and eat. Among Indian youth, platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook serve as the primary sites of political and social engagement, meaning that shutdowns disproportionately disrupt the very tools they rely on even as their offline participation remains limited. These economic losses, calculated at \$585.4 million in 2023 (Top10VPN, 2024), are not simply a drag on GDP but a further entrenchment of the inequality between "connected core" and "silenced periphery" (Human Rights Watch & Internet Freedom Foundation, 2023).

IX. 4 Adaptive Strategies and Hybrid Repertoires of Protest

Shutdowns do not entirely stop the voice of the activist movement; instead, they challenge the movement to change and prove its resilience. Protesters have traditionally relied on personal communication, and this form of communication becomes relevant again during shutdowns. The farmers' protests offer the clearest example of this resilience. Faced with connectivity blackouts following Republic Day 2021, protesters pivoted to community outreach, physical pamphlets, and independent print media such as the Trolley Times, demonstrating that when digital channels are severed, movements do not collapse but reorganize around older repertoires of communication.

Activists may also rely on technological evasions, such as the use of a Virtual Private Network (VPN). However, this is not without limitation, especially because authorities have been successfully blocking or restricting this form of evasion. Hence, social movements may end up adopting hybrid approaches that bring together traditional offline methods and digital ones, especially after connectivity is restored. The ability to

adjust is a characteristic feature of what social movement scholars call “adaptive contention.” They adjust and recalibrate their repertoires in reaction to state repression, showing incredible resiliency. Yet, this also translates into greater effort, time, and resources, especially for those who lack them. The evident asymmetry in how authorities rapidly respond to imposing shutdowns and how social movements labor to evade this is a demonstration of the power imbalance in India’s digital politics.

IX. 5 Shutdowns and the Crisis of Democratic Accountability

The constitutional provisions for India provide the right to freedom of speech and assembly under Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(b). Any restriction can be imposed if it meets the criteria of reasonableness. However, shutdowns are being increasingly imposed in ways that appear to circumvent this standard.

The Supreme Court’s ruling in the case of *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India* (2020) clearly stated that shutdowns are unconstitutional and that any restriction must be temporary. Yet, the effectiveness of this ruling has still not been properly implemented. They are being imposed without much transparency. The rationale for imposing shutdowns has not been disclosed, which makes it difficult for the people to hold the government accountable.

When governments choose silence over dialogue in dealing with dissent, they may end up marginalizing entire sections of people. In regions like the Northeast or Kashmir, where historical grievances have already put a strain on the relationship between these states and the center, shutdowns like these can be seen as a form of further exclusion. The repeated imposition of shutdowns reflects a change in the way democracies are being run.

IX. 6 Comparative Dimensions: India in the Global Context

India’s track record in implementing internet shutdowns makes it a unique and disturbing case among nations across the world. In 2024, Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition reported a record 296 shutdowns across 54 nations, with India recording 84 shutdowns (across 16 states and union territories; 41 related to protests and 23 to communal violence). India remained the top global offender for the seventh consecutive year. In 2025, SFLC.in’s Internet Shutdowns Tracker recorded 54 shutdowns in India, with continued high frequency particularly in conflict-prone regions such as Manipur, Haryana, and Jammu & Kashmir. These four nations (Myanmar, Pakistan, Russia, and India) together reported the majority of global shutdowns in recent years. Trends observed in 2025 confirm the persistence of this pattern.

Authoritarian states such as Iran or Myanmar may be expected to implement such practices. However, the fact that the world’s largest democracy is among the top offenders is a matter of serious concern. It blurs the lines between democratic and authoritarian digital practices. India’s digital practice may indicate that even electoral democracies may turn to authoritarian digital strategies in dealing with contentious politics. This places India in the context of discussions on hybrid governance.

IX. 7 Towards a Critical Understanding of Shutdowns

Shutdowns are technological as well as political actions. From a technological viewpoint, they involve disruptions in networks, disconnection of communication channels, and disruption of information flows. Politically, they represent authority, impose discipline on dissenters, and re-establish control over space.

In India, these measures modify the context in which civil society operates, encouraging movements to become creative while limiting the inclusiveness of political engagement. They represent both the resilience of citizens and the coercive power of the state. To fully understand their significance, it is necessary to look beyond immediate disruptions and consider their long-term implications for democratic culture, normalizing the suspension of rights, redefining the limits of protest, and ultimately reshaping the relationship between citizens and the state.

X. Conclusion

Internet shutdowns in India embody the tension between state management and digital empowerment. The online space enables rapid mobilization and global connectivity, yet deliberate connectivity management stifles activism, increases inequality, and erodes democratic accountability. The hardest hit are those reliant on mobile internet connectivity, and while adaptive strategies for activists to build resilience against shutdowns are strong, they are patchy and costly. However, this is a function of digital democracy and strategic governance practices that limit participation. Understanding this complex interplay necessitates a critical interrogation of internet shutdowns not as bureaucratic blunders but as instruments of digital authoritarianism and their long-term implications for digital participation in India.

XI. Policy Recommendations

To address these issues, the following measures are proposed: (1) Mandate public disclosure of all shutdown orders with reasoned justifications and sunset clauses, in line with the Anuradha Bhasin judgment; (2) Establish an independent oversight body to review proportionality; (3) Invest in digital literacy and offline hybrid protest toolkits for marginalized communities; and (4) Enact comprehensive digital rights legislation that treats access to the internet as a fundamental right under Article 21. These steps would help bridge the gap between democratic values and technological advancement, preventing digital participation from being eclipsed by digital management.

References

1. Access Now & #KeepItOn. (2025). *Emboldened offenders, endangered communities: Internet shutdowns in 2024*. <https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton-2024-report>
2. Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India, (2020) 3 SCC 637.
3. Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. N. (2018). *The global disinformation order: 2019 global inventory of organised social media manipulation*. Oxford Internet Institute, Project on Computational Propaganda. <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/posts/the-global-disinformation-order-2019-global-inventory-of-organised-social-media-manipulation/>
4. Diamond, L. (2002). Thinking about hybrid regimes. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), 21–35.
5. Howard, P. N., & Hussain, M. M. (2013). *Democracy's fourth wave? Digital media and the Arab Spring*. Oxford University Press.
6. Human Rights Watch. (2023). *India: Internet shutdowns hurt vulnerable communities*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/13/india-internet-shutdowns-hurt-vulnerable-communities>
7. Human Rights Watch & Internet Freedom Foundation. (2023). *No internet means no work, no pay, no food*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/06/13/no-internet-means-no-work-no-pay-no-food/impact-internet-shutdowns-indias-poor>
8. IMAI & Kantar. (2026). *Internet in India Report 2025*. Internet and Mobile Association of India.
9. Mann, M. (1984). The autonomous power of the state: Its origins, mechanisms and consequences. *European Journal of Sociology*, 25(2), 185–213.
10. McAdam, D., McCarthy, J. D., & Zald, M. N. (Eds.). (1996). *Comparative perspectives on social movements*. Cambridge University Press.
11. Nayar, P. K. (2022). *Digital activism in India*. Routledge.
12. Rao, S. (2023). Ephemeral engagement: Digital activism among Indian youth. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 45(1), 112–130.
13. Software Freedom Law Centre. (2026). *Internet shutdowns tracker*. <https://internetshutdowns.in/>
14. Thomas, A., & Bhatia, S. (2021). Digital feminism in India: #MeToo and beyond. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(4), 567–583.
15. Tilly, C. (1995). *Popular contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834*. Harvard University Press.

16. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2015). *Contentious politics* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
17. Top10VPN. (2024). *The global cost of internet shutdowns 2023*. <https://www.top10vpn.com/research/cost-of-internet-shutdowns/2023/>
18. Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.

