Internet shutdowns in India

Why in news?

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India topped the world with the highest number of internet shutdowns by government authorities, according to a report by Delhi-based Software Freedom Law Centre(SLFS).

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What does the report say?

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- Internet shutdown is defined as “disablement of access to internet as a whole within one or more localities for any duration of time”.
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- There have been 233 reported instances of suspension of internet services in India in the last seven years.
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- However, 73% of these shutdowns have happened only in the last year and a half.
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- Internet shutdowns go against the human rights of citizens and should call for further questioning on their purpose in the interest of transparency.
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- The researchers also say that centre issues 7000-8000 orders for phone tapping per month in India.
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- Also, an US based think tank released the 'Freedom on the Net' report which offers a bleak perspective on the state of internet freedom across the world.
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- Out of the 65 countries assessed, 26 countries are said to have experienced a deterioration and almost half of all declines were related to elections.
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What are the consequences of Internet shutdowns?

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- There may have been even more shutdowns than reported since many states refuse to respond to RTI (Right to Information) applications asking for details of shutdowns.
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- These can last anywhere from a day to 72 hours, or even longer than that.
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- Every shutdown negates the official policy thrust of promoting greater digitisation by removing the channel for digital communication.
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- In states such as Jammu & Kashmir and Manipur, multiple shutdowns make normal online activities almost impossible.
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- Quite apart from the disturbing impact on freedom of expression, shutdowns impose huge costs as well.
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- The Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (Icrier) estimates that there were 16,315 hours of internet shutdowns between 2012 and 2017, costing an equivalent of $3.04 billion.
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- The costs in 2018 alone would have been of the same order, or higher, given both an increase in shutdowns and the increasing volume of online business.
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What are the concerns?

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- Local governments use the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services Rules (Public Safety or Public Emergency), which were introduced in August 2017 to order a suspension of internet services.
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- In the past, Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code was used for the same purpose.
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- This section allows the authorities to lay down guidelines to impose temporary measures to maintain public tranquility.
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- Reports suggest shutdowns are often imposed by low-ranking officials, and then retrospectively cleared at higher levels.
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- Moreover, news of a shutdown is rarely disseminated directly to the public, which learns about it the hard way.
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- This draconian measure seems to have become a default option during election periods, public protests or during the periods of communal tension.
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- These are usually related to apprehensions that social media channels such as WhatsApp may be used to instigate mob violence or to coordinate some act of public protest.
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- But shutdowns have been ordered for all sorts of other reasons.
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- For example, a shutdown was ordered to prevent cheating in police recruitment exams in Rajasthan and many others were ordered in Maharashtra to “prevent rumour-mongering”.
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- Thus, India was critiqued for its internet shutdowns as “collective punishment” it imposes on its own people.
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- This is undoubtedly true since every shutdown inconveniences millions of ordinary citizens and causes large, quantifiable losses.
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What should be done?

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- Resorting to this measure represents a failure of policing in the country.
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- However, in states such as Telangana, the local administration has been unwilling to resort to this measure.
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- Hence, the police have developed more effective methods of interacting with local communities and gathering intelligence to scotch the spread of inflammatory fake news.
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- Thus, instead of using a blunt instrument such as a complete shutdown, the law and order machinery across the country must find less damaging ways of dealing with increasingly connected populations.
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- Otherwise, the country could see an increasing number of shutdowns, which would run counter to the policy of encouraging digitisation.
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Source: Business Standard

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