Social Media Ban For Children In India

***Mains**: GS-I – Society & GS-II – Polity & Governance*

Why in News?

The debate over banning social media for children under 16 has gained traction in India, particularly after the tragic incident in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, where three sisters lost their lives amid screen addiction and parental conflict.

What was the background?

- **About the incident** – The tragic death of three minor sisters who jumped from the ninth floor of their apartment because of their father confiscated their mobile phones, cutting them off from online games, Korean cultural content, and virtual friends.
- **Police investigation** – Initially framed as digital addiction, but later expanded to include family dysfunction and psychological distress.
- **Broader Implications** – This has sparked national debate on banning social media for children under 16, highlighted risks of screen addiction, gaming compulsion, and cultural immersion without parental guidance.
- **Experts view** – Banning social media for children is a misguided response to tragedies linked to screen addiction, instead of blunt bans, India needs a healthy media ecology and nuanced regulation.

What about the social media user base & the revenue and market potential in India?

- **User base** – Instagram and Facebook each have over 400 million users in India, more than any other country, according to DataReportal.
- Snapchat has more than 200 million on its platform there, making India its largest market by users, while X has more than 20 million users, the data shows.
- **Revenue potential** – While the companies typically earn less revenue per user in India than in more economically developed countries such as the US.
- **Huge growth potential** – India is home to the *world's largest remaining pool of untapped digital consumers*, with millions yet to get online.
- **Strategic importance** – Despite lower per-user earnings, India is seen as a critical growth market for global tech firms.

What are the legal frameworks that governs social media in India?

- **Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000** – Foundation for digital regulation in India, providing legal framework for cybercrimes and electronic commerce.

- **IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021** – Requires social media platforms to have a grievance redressal mechanism, appoint compliance officers, and remove content violating laws (e.g., obscenity, national security) within specific timelines.
- **Section 79 of IT Act** – Provides safe harbor protection to intermediaries for third-party content, provided they follow due diligence.
- **Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860** – It is used to address illegal content, such as defamation (Section 499), promoting enmity (Section 153A), and obscenity.

Status of Digital Economy of India
• **Contribution to GDP** – India's digital economy contributed *11.74% of GDP in 2022–23* (Rs.31.64 lakh crore / USD 402 billion). • It employs 14.67 million workers (2.55% of the workforce) and productivity is ***nearly 5 times higher*** than the rest of the economy. • **Sectoral Breakdown** - Digitally enabling industries (ICT services, electronics, computers, communication equipment) - 7.83% of GVA. - Digital platforms & intermediaries - 2% of GVA. - Digitalisation in traditional sectors (BFSI, retail, education) - 2% of GVA. • **Future Outlook** – Digital economy is projected to *reach 20% of GVA by 2029–30*, surpassing agriculture and manufacturing. • **Growth drivers** – Rapid adoption of AI, expansion of cloud services, rise of Global Capability Centers (GCCs), with India hosting 55% of the world's GCCs.

What about the global context?

- **Australia** (targeted ban) – It became the ***first country in the world*** to ban most social media platforms for children under 16, making it mandatory for platforms to verify users' ages and disable accounts by underage users.
- **Spain** – In Feb, 2026, it has announced plans to ban under-16 social media use, with criminal liability for executives.
- **Others** – Also, at least six other countries, including France, the UK, and the Netherlands, are weighing similar restrictions, all these are seen as moral panic responses, not effective solutions.

Why these bans don't work for India?

- **Technically porous** – Bans are technically porous and difficult to implement even if outsourced to social media companies themselves.
- Adolescents are often more digitally literate than the legislators regulating them.
- Jurisdictions with strict age-based bans invariably trigger a mass migration to Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) or, worse, push young users from regulated platforms like Instagram to unmonitored spaces on the dark web, where grooming and extremism thrive unchecked.
- **Risk of surveillance** – Some forms of enforcement, if linked to identity verification, may also pose the risk of connecting every social media account with a government ID, creating a mass surveillance framework.
- **Ignores the complexity of adolescent development** – Social media can be a lifeline for marginalized youth (rural adolescents, urban slum dwellers, queer and differently-

abled teens) noted by National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children & some child rights bodies.
- **Democratic deficit** – Policies are made for young people without consulting them.
- In India, there is a chronic habit of making policy for young people without ever speaking to them.
- **Gender inequality** – It prevent girls from lower income households, particularly young girls, from using the Internet for their social mobility and charting their future.
- Only 33.3% of women in India reported having ever used the Internet, compared to 57.1% of men (National Sample Survey).

What are the alternatives proposed?

- **Government must abandon its addiction to censorship** – It must stop relying on the blunt instrument of bans or centralising every government response within the "notice and takedown" regime of the IT Act, 2000.
- **Regulate Big Tech** – Instead, it must directly confront the economic power and technical architecture of Big Tech by enforcing "duty of care" obligations towards minors, digital competition law, monetary penalties.
- **Independent regulator** – The rules must be enforced by an independent, expert regulator, not by the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology that lacks expertise and is susceptible to political influence.
- **Domestic research funding** – India needs serious public funding for surveys and longitudinal research on how social media actually shapes children's well-being locally, across class, gender, caste and region.
- **Youth participation** – Young people must be central to the policy process — from helping design surveys to actively shaping the findings, ignoring their voices has already proven to be a mistake.
- The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, with its poorly designed "consent gating", will result either in false declarations or exclusion.
- **Consistent regulation** – Extend scrutiny to AI chatbots, which also pose risks (cognitive debt, unsafe interactions).

What lies ahead?

- A ban might offer the comforting illusion of control — a way for the politicians to show they "did something" after the latest tragedy, but harms the very children it seeks to protect.
- Instead of banning social media, adults should focus on creating a healthy media environment for children, this is harder but more meaningful than a ban.
- But it requires confronting society's contradictions: on one hand, social media is demonized, on the other, AI and tech innovation are celebrated without regulation.

References

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