DIGITAL BARRICADES AND BLACKOUTS: INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN INDIA

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BY

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled "**Digital Barricades and Blackouts: Internet Shutdowns in India,**" submitted by **Manisha Madapathi**, bearing registration number **19SNPC02**, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of **Doctor of Philosophy in Communication** in the Department of Communication, Sarojini Naidu School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad, India, is a bona fide work carried out by her.

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I, **Manisha Madapathi,** hereby declare that this doctoral thesis, titled **Digital Barricades and Blackouts: Internet Shutdowns in India"** submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of **Professor Usha Raman** is a bona fide research work and is free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/INFLIBNET.

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Among 17 goals (https://sdgs.un.org/goals), the following SDG is addressed by the thesis:

16th SDG: peace, justice and strong institutions

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs) ADDRESSED BY THIS RESEARCH

particularly refer to the **16th Sustainable Development Goal, which is peace, justice and strong institutions**. This SDG promotes peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, and advocates to provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. The 16th SDG[1] further enlists targets, of which the following two are prominent for this thesis:

1. **Target 16.10- ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms (in accordance with nation and international agreements)**
2. **Target 16.6- develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.**

This this specifically calls for ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms by documenting how internet shutdowns restrict access to communication and information. This limits citizens' ability to participate in democratic discourse and hold power to account. By analysing how these shutdowns occur and their socio-political implications, my work exposes the barriers to transparency and freedom of expression—both central to SDG 16.

By examining the role of state, media, civil society, and service providers in implementing or resisting shutdowns, the thesis highlights the need for institutional accountability and due process. The study's engagement with legal frameworks aligns with the SDG 16 emphasis on just, responsive, and inclusive institutions that protect rather than restrict citizens.

By analysing the disruptive effects of communication blackouts, the thesis contributes to understanding how maintaining open digital channels is essential for dialog, participation, and non-

[1] Goal 16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions https://globalgoals.org/goals/16-peace-justice-and-strong-institutions/

violent conflict mediation. The thesis also contributes to the study of the resilience and agency of maintaining democratic participation despite structural constraints. This resonates with SDG 16's emphasis on inclusive decision-making and empowering citizens to engage in governance.

Internet shutdowns in India and elsewhere undermine these targets and erode the ability of citizens to exercise freedoms, and their trust in institutions which are meant to protect them. Shutdown fuels mistrust and exacerbates tensions, and silences peaceful dissent. This thesis documents these shutdowns to bring to the fore that such practices destabilize peace, weaken the pursuit of justice, and ultimately lead to the deterioration of a democracy.

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THESIS ABSTRACT

This thesis is about internet shutdowns in India, with a focus on citizen-led protests. The thesis analyses two protest movements— the anti-CAA and the Farmers' protest, which have faced shutdowns. In order to do this, the thesis examines the relationship between citizens, state authorities, civil society organisations, and internet service providers. The study explores how people come together to call out injustices and the role that digital media plays in these mobilisations. It offers both macroscopic and microscopic views of networked movements and examines how digital governance has evolved alongside technological advancements at the national and global level. Frameworks of internet sovereignty are used to explain the different ways in which nations govern their internet. The latest legal developments in the country regarding regulating the digital space are explored to contextualise the policy debates.

The first case study focuses on the anti-CAA protests, drawing on newspaper reports to analyse the impacts of shutdowns on citizens across the country. This case illustrates how shutdowns simultaneously control the flow of people and information. The second case study examines the Farmers' protest of 2020-21, which resulted in the victory of the protestors against the union government. Using in-depth interviews, the research highlights how protestors navigated repressive tactics designed to deter them. The analysis demonstrates how networked movements can sustain even under prolonged communication blackouts.

The dissertation contributes to scholarship on digital infrastructures, sovereignty, and the politics of communication by linking disruptions to broader theoretical debates on networked governance, citizen rights, and infrastructural control. The thesis sees that infrastructures of social change—intended to enable connectivity, participation, and empowerment—can simultaneously become tools of control and surveillance. The study concludes with reflections on internet governance, the urgency of safeguarding digital rights, and potential directions for research on digital public infrastructure, civic participation, and the evolving negotiation between freedom and state control in India.

Keywords: Internet shutdowns, protest, dissent, digital sovereignty, digital India, freedom of speech.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Dissent, Discourse, Democracy

> *It began on the Internet social networks, as these are spaces of autonomy, largely beyond the control of governments and corporations that had monopolized the channels of communication as the foundation of their power, throughout history. By sharing sorrow and hope in the free public space of the Internet, by connecting to each other, and by envisioning projects from multiple sources of being, individuals formed networks, regardless of their personal views or organizational attachments. They came together. And their togetherness helped them to overcome fear, this paralyzing emotion on which the powers that be rely in order to prosper and reproduce, by intimidation or discouragement, and when necessary by sheer violence, be it naked or institutionally enforced. From the safety of cyberspace, people from all ages and conditions moved toward occupying urban space, on a blind date with each other and with the destiny they wanted to forge, as they claimed their right to make history – their history – in a display of the self-awareness that has always characterized major social movements.*
>
> -Manuel Castells (2015, p.2)

Manuel Castells, in his book *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* begins with this optimistic worldview of networked social movements. From the "safety of cyberspace," networked actors translate digital solidarity into physical occupation of public spaces, asserting their right to shape history. The notion of digital space as autonomous from the influence of governments and corporations presents a compelling aspiration. This dissertation is an exploration of such networked movements which fundamentally confront social injustices. Such

mobilizations are perceived as a threat to those in power who often respond through mechanisms designed to control dissent; when these measures prove insufficient, they shut it down entirely. And it is this play between the two that is of interest to this thesis. There are several other factors that influence this dynamic. In order to comprehend them, I lean on the frameworks of individual rights and liberties, territorial sovereignty, digital infrastructures, and control regimes. This way, I explore the precarities that come with speech mediated by digital channels.

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In this chapter, I lay out the foundational discourses that relate to my topic of inquiry, which is internet shutdowns in India, particularly imposed during citizen-led protest movements. The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I look at the several legal provisions that address the exercise of speech and dissent, nationally and internationally. These rules and recommendations are constantly evolving, and such developments in the Information Technology sector have been noted to understand their regulation better. In the second section, I further delve into the literature on political mobilisation, and the role of communicative networks in bringing people together. In the third section, I look at the response of states to such mobilisations, which in some cases is to impose internet shutdowns. In the fourth section of the chapter, I introduce my research question in detail, and the case studies that I use in this thesis. I also elucidate the methodologies and perspectives that I employ to make sense of the data gathered and analysed.

The Indian democratic system has been in place for nearly eight decades, and has been an evolving yet resilient project shaped by contestation and adaptation since. Speech and the circulation of public opinion through media form a fundamental pillar of democracy, which allows citizens to participate in political processes freely. This speech enables citizens to articulate dissent, deliberate on governance, and hold institutions accountable. Freedom of speech is also enshrined in the Indian

Constitution under Article 19(1)(a)[1], as a core democratic right acknowledging that it is essential for democracy to sustain its participatory ethos. The following section looks at some of the regulatory practices of speech and expression in India, and the international obligations that it seemingly fulfils.

1.1 State Regulation and Restriction of Speech in India

Freedom of speech has never been absolute, either historically or in contemporary times, even in the more libertarian societies. Citizens' freedoms and rights are governed variously, both at national and international levels. Laws pertaining to freedom of speech and expression, hate speech, traditional media, and online media almost always have reasonable restrictions attached to them. Even a guiding framework like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) places limits on Article 7 which protects citizens from any form of discrimination and incitement to discrimination, through Article 29. This states that limitations may be permissible under law for 'meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society' (NLUD, 2018, p.3). The International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which India has signed and ratified, recognises the right to free speech under Article 19 and 20. However, under Article 20(2) citing restrictions, the UN Special Rapporteur clarifies that there are three key elements to consider while restricting speech, "Firstly, only advocacy of hatred is covered; second, hatred must amount to advocacy which constitutes incitement, rather than incitement alone; and third, such incitement must lead to one of the listed results, namely discrimination, hostility or violence". (NLUD, 2018, p.7)

The Rabat Plan of Action is a set of standards and recommendations which emerged from a series of meetings held by the UN Commissioner of Human Rights. They too reiterate with caution that

[1] Ministry of External Affairs. (n.d.). *Part III: Fundamental Rights* [PDF]. Government of India. https://www.mea.gov.in/images/pdf1/part3.pdf

national laws dealing with incitement should be framed on the lines of Article 20 of the ICCPR with a six part test to deal with criminal prohibition of speech- "(i) context of speech, (ii) identity of the speaker, (iii) speaker's intention, (iv) content of the impugned speech, (v) width of audience accessible to the speech, and (vi) likelihood of inciting violence" (NLUD, 2018, p. 8). The guidelines and recommendations read along with their restrictions seem to indicate that lawmakers are drawing a significant link between how speech and action, in terms of incitement, could lead to violence.

1.1.1 Incidents of Violence Attributed to the Internet

Many violent incidents have been attributed to content circulated on social media over the past decade. Some of these incidents have even led to the suspension of internet services in some places, owing to apprehensions about provocative social media rumours and misinformation. A paper (Arun & Nayak, 2016) published by the Berkman Klein Centre for Internet and Society discusses some preliminary findings of online hate speech in India. In 2013, communal clashes broke out in Muzaffarnagar, where social media was claimed to have played a significant role. A misattributed video on social media claiming Hindus of the area were lynched by a Muslim mob made the rounds, fuelling violence in the already tense town (Jain, 2013). A similar incident happened in 2014, in Pune, where a mob lynched a Muslim man, who had no relation to the morphed images of Chatrapati Shivaji doing the rounds on Facebook and other social media applications (Kulkarni, 2014). In 2015, to curb the increasing violence by agitated members of the Patidar community in Gujarat, the state imposed a mobile internet ban as a preventive measure (Kateshiya, 2015). This move was criticised by the petitioner, saying that merely banning the social media sites would have sufficed, instead of a blanket ban that stalled other activity that could have taken place over the internet. Similarly in February 2016, the Jat community agitation in Haryana for reservations led to the suspension of mobile internet in those areas where widespread violence had led to the loss of 30

lives (NDTV, 2016). Police authorities said the ban was to only curb fake messages about untoward incidents being circulated on WhatsApp as a precautionary measure, and would be lifted soon.

1.2 Indian Law on Online Hate Speech

In India, the regulation of hate speech in the online space has been evolving ever since the Internet came into regular and widespread use in the country. There are broadly three ways in which the law treats online hate speech; first, criminal action may be taken against the author (or at times, the intermediary) responsible for such content; second, the offending content may be blocked, filtered and/or taken down; and third, access to the internet itself may be cut off. The primary framework that the Indian law provides for dealing with online hate speech is the Information Technology Act, 2000 along with applicable IPC and CrPC legislations, where required. After several controversial arrests, Section 66A of the IT Act added in 2008, got struck down for being too arbitrary and disproportionately restricting freedom of speech. However, the Parliamentary Standing Committee's 189th report in 2015 proposed new grounds on which to criminalise hate speech, "Specifically it recommends amendments to the IT Act to criminalise online content that 'promotes ill will, hatred and enmity amongst communities, race, religions etc.', similar to Sections 153A and 153B of the IPC" (NLUD, 2018, p.135). These recommendations aim to operate on an individual level in order to lay criminal offence against the author(s).

In the second case, the state has the authority to order intermediaries to block or take down harmful content. Section 69A of the IT Act[2] specifies that only government orders that consider the blocking of content as 'necessary or expedient' under specified grounds, may do so. Of all the grounds, maintenance of 'public order' is most commonly used to block hate speech. Private individuals

[2] Section 69A of the IT Act, 2000
https://www.meity.gov.in/static/uploads/2024/10/1d131885a32a55ddd3a91c5e93d373af.pdf

cannot use this act to block content, instead they have to raise a complaint to the 'nodal officers' of departments or ministries of central, union territory, or state governments concerned. The committee that oversees the complaint from when it is filed, consists of a designated officer and representatives from the ministries of law and justice, home affairs, information and broadcasting, and the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In). The Blocking Rules under section 69A asks for the designated officer to identify the person, or the intermediary, or the computer resource that hosted the information requested to be blocked, and give them an opportunity to be heard, and file their response to the complaint. The committee's recommendations along with the initial details sent by the nodal officer must be submitted to the Secretary of the Department of Information Technology for approval. Commonly, the Department of Telecommunication has been known to issue orders to licensed internet service providers (ISPs) to block content. Furthermore, section 79 of the IT Act grants immunity from liability upon intermediaries, only if they are (a) functioning as a platform and not a speaker; (b) refrain from 'initiating transmission, selecting the receiver of the transmission or selecting or modifying the information contained in the transmission; and (c) observing 'due diligence'. (NLUD, 2018, p. 139) The IT (Intermediary Guidelines) Rules, 2011 specifies that an intermediary must take down infringing material upon receiving 'actual knowledge'-- information received through a 'court order or being notified by an appropriate government or its agency'. This immunity is subject to change by the recent IT Rules, 2021 that have come into play, which I discuss further in subsequent chapters.

The third way in which the state responds to online hate speech is internet shutdowns. With respect to complete internet shutdowns, the NLUD (2018) report finds a lack of clarity under which laws the shutdowns are undertaken. This arises from the fact that official information or orders were not available in the public domain, until recently. Section 144 of the CrPC, 1973 can be used by the District Magistrate to order intermediaries to shut down the access of internet if such an order is

likely to prevent ‘disturbance of the public tranquility, or a riot, or an affray’. According to the law, this can only be passed for ‘immediate prevention’. Additionally, in 2017 the Department of Telecommunications issued rules applicable to shutdowns, titled ‘Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules, 2017. This helps establish a procedural framework for implementing internet shutdowns. According to this, only the “Secretary to the Government of India in the Ministry of Home Affairs in the case of Government of India or the Secretary to the State Government in-charge of the Home Department in the case of a State Government’ can issue directions for shutdowns. In exceptional circumstances, orders may be issued by “an officer, not below the rank of a Joint Secretary to the Government of India” (NLUD, 2018, p. 141). The NULD report makes clear that many instances in the past have shown that shutdowns were implemented using both, section 144, CrPC and Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency and Public Safety) Rules either in anticipation of violence or as a result of ongoing disturbances.

1.2.1 Recent Developments in IT law

In February 2021, the Government of India in coordination with the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and Ministry of Information and Broadcast has issued a new subordinate legislation called Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. Subordinate legislation is a process by which the executive is given powers by primary legislation to make laws in order to implement and administer the requirements of that primary legislation. In this case the primary legislation being the IT Act, 2000. An online discussion hosted by Medianama (2021, April 23rd) invited stakeholders and experts in the field to discuss the impact of the IT Rules, 2021 on intermediaries. Some of the key findings and debates are noted in an event report (Medianama, 2021), from which I borrow the following.

These rules have significantly reduced the protection from liability that platforms enjoyed previously. The rules expect significant social media intermediaries to establish a grievance redressal mechanism consisting of a body of a Chief Compliance Officer, a nodal contact person, and a Resident Grievance Officer. The Resident Grievance Officer is expected to acknowledge a complaint within 24 hours of it being lodged, and resolve it in a shortened period of 15 days. They need to submit a monthly report to the government showing the total number of complaints they received and the actions they have taken and the contents of said complaints. They have been asked to double their data retention period for up to 6 months for "investigative purposes". These platforms must at least once in a year remind its users the terms and conditions of being on their platform. The Chief Compliance Officer is expected to take personal liability in cases where the intermediaries are unable to comply with these rules. This places the Officer in an extremely vulnerable position since the rules permit the government to take direct action upon them. Of these rules, the most controversial one being, the need to trace the "first originator" of information on these platforms on the request of the government. This poses an impossible task to those messaging apps where text/audio/video are end-to-end encrypted. In a chain of forwarding, it may be possible to know if the content is a video or photo, but impossible for a text message. While the rules ask the platforms to find less intrusive means for identification of the originator, it is simply not possible without breaking into the end-to-end encryption from the platform's end. This will also compromise the privacy of everyone in the middle of the chain of forwards (Medianama, 2021).

In the next section I look at how scholars across the world have looked at the different kinds of communication networks that play a role in civic participation and dissent. I also refer to civil disobedience in the pre-internet age, as well as dissent in the internet age, which is still unfolding in many parts of the world as we speak.

1.3 Discourse on Political Mobilisation

In this section, I take a look at the literature on political mobilisations that have made use of the internet to congregate and dissent. The internet has not always been considered as a medium that needed to be controlled by the state. In fact, as Lessig (2006) says in post-Communist Europe, it was thought of as the opposite of control– it wouldn't and couldn't be controlled by the state: "Governments could threaten, but behaviour could not be controlled; laws could be passed, but they would have no real effect" (p.3). In a similar vein, Castells (2008) talks about an international public sphere that is not governed by any particular sovereign nation, but is shaped by various states and global non-state actors. Castells (2008) observes that a major part of the public sphere of the 21st century is constituted by media. And in the digital era, it includes mass media and the Internet and wireless communication networks. The relationship between the state and the civil society plays out in the public sphere thereby defining the polity. Castells finds that one of the reasons public spheres take on global proportions is the decreased ability of nationally based political systems to manage the dissent when it takes on a transnational scale. As observed by Castells, this public sphere when it goes international through digital media networks, finds global reach, expression, and support. To illustrate, he takes the example of the Zapatistas, "who formed a social movement opposed to the economic, social, cultural effects of globalisation (represented by NAFTA) on the Mexican Indians and on the Mexican people at large" (Castells, 2008, p.85). This movement is considered the harbinger of many other movements of global justice whose inception was on the internet.

Zynep Tufekci's Twitter and Teargas (2016) is a descriptive account of the internet giving isolated individual activists an access point to each other in order to organise and congregate (much like the Zapatistas, which finds a mention in her book). As the subtitle of her book suggests, with power comes the fragility of the networked protests. She acknowledges the social forces that determine the

transformation of technology and that it is unequal and undemocratic. Her book combines her own ethnographic research and her analysis, with the research of others and some big data analysis from social media outlets. She takes examples of her own participation in movements like Occupy Wall Street, Gezi Park and others to do this. The power of the internet makes it popular as a tool for protest; it gives people the ability to quickly organise and scale. But, according to Tufekci (2016), it's a mistake to judge modern protests using the same criteria we used to judge pre-internet protests. And this she does by bringing in the Civil Rights Movement of 1963 in the United States. Some other studies mentioned ahead will also take this example as a stark contrast to the faster but less stable movements that emerge online.

In her observation of the online movements, there inevitably comes a point at which the online momentum falls short in conceiving real changes. Says Tufekci: "The internet similarly allows networked movements to grow dramatically and rapidly, but without prior building of formal or informal organisational and other collective capacities that could prepare them for the inevitable challenges they will face and give them the ability to respond to what comes next". (2016, p.xii) That makes them less able to respond to government counters, change their tactics—a phenomenon Tufekci calls "tactical freeze"—to make movement-wide decisions, and survive over the long haul. She also assesses the many ways in which governments use the internet to sabotage the momentum of people's movements. She says, "The internet's relatively chaotic nature, with too much information and weak gatekeepers, can asymmetrically empower governments by allowing them to develop new forms of censorship based not on blocking information, but on making available information unusable." (2016, p.xxix) She further states that attention is the oxygen for movements, without which it will not catch fire. She interestingly points to the discourse building capacity of the "weak-tie" networks. Where, through symbolic interactions create a baseline for common

knowledge not just by what you knew but what others you knew knew, and so on. This keeps redrawing the boundaries of discourse that a movement situates itself in.

Zizi Papacharissi and Maria de Fatima Oliveira's work (2012) on affective news is of relevance because they see how revolutionary events unfold with the help of social media. Taking the case of the Egyptian revolution that overthrew President Hosni Mubarak, they trace how the people of Egypt reacted by using blogs and microblogs to stay informed and form networks when access for the mainstream media was blocked by the state at the time. This then led to a collaborative construction of events out of atomised stories over networked media. They claim that when news absorbs narratives generated online, it forces journalism to evolve and adapt to the codes of social media. Their study aims to comprehend the form of news that news feeds support. And because events shared on Twitter or Facebook need not adhere to journalistic standards, emphasising and overplaying aspects of events led to the construction and dissemination of subjective narratives.

Papacharissi and Oliviera note that citizens engaging in journalistic activity can sometimes be seen as a substitute for mainstream news reporting. This finds a very crucial space in the current media environment in India, where balanced news reporting seems to be on the wane (Garg, 2020). The term "affect" in this context throws a wide net over the kind of reactions to data that users post on social media. "Affect refers to emotion that is subjectively experienced, and has been connected to processes of premediation, enabled by newer media, that frequently anticipate news or events prior to their occurrence" (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012, p.11). Affective news combines "news, opinion, and emotion to the point where discerning one from the other is difficult and doing so misses the point" (p.1).

In another instance, in Turkey, during the Gezi Park protests citizens turned to social media for "confirmed news" (Parks, Goodwin & Han, 2017). Protestors along with mainstream news organisations not only used Twitter feeds and blogs to report news, but also to confirm existing information online. There was a sense of trust attributed to online activists who people knew in real life, and would therefore lay more trust in their information than a mainstream reporter they had never met. Online posts by activists and common citizens emerging out of an urgency to transmit information often finds subjective expression. This affective discourse of information finds legitimacy from the people in these networks built over the internet which in a way determine news values beyond the newsroom. On the other hand, the Turkish state caught up fast on this Twitter trend, only to impose severe crackdown on internet freedoms and tightened its grip on social media use and persecuting demonstrators (Parks, Goodwin & Han, 2017). Many users who shared posts from the protest site were booked for "inciting riots", and over 200 journalists lost their jobs covering the Gezi protests. Despite the growing risks of posting online users, regular citizens and journalists alike have persisted to use social media. Furthermore, governments are using these very platforms for digital vigilantism and lateral surveillance over international websites which do not adhere to state strictures and censorship laws. This way in which social media platforms like Twitter, which are used for "transmitting" by the citizens at one end, are also being used by the state to "trap" them is called "transmit-trap" dynamics coined by Parks, et al. (2017) in this study on internet freedom in Turkey. Therefore people find themselves simultaneously empowered and targeted at the same time under this regime of "networked authoritarianism".

An article by sociologist Doug McAdam published in the American Journal of Sociology (1986) opens up avenues for examining individuals and their motivations for participating in risky political movements. This case study is a step away from internet based networks, used to offer an insight into the relations built in a non-digital fashion for political mobilisation. In his article, 'Recruitment

to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer', McAdam (1986) undertakes an analysis of those who participated in the 1964 Freedom Summer Project that took college youth to Mississippi as a part of the civil rights movements in the United States. This endeavour posed very high risks to participants. They were made aware that they might encounter police retaliation, be followed by enemy spies, and encounter beating, bombing and arrests. McAdam studied both, those who went to Mississippi for the Freedom Project, and those who withdrew through finding "micro-structural factors" that affected their participation, and drew results. Participants were distinguished from withdrawals primarily on the basis of their (a) greater number of organisational affiliations, (b) higher levels of prior civil rights activity, and (c) stronger and more extensive ties to other participants.

A distinction that McAdam points out with respect to studying movements is that, "…the boundaries of movements are never as clearly defined as those of formal organisations. Movements are much more ephemeral. Demarcating the boundaries of a movement in order to distinguish participants from nonparticipants is extremely difficult" (1986, p.66-67). He instead suggests that one can look at specific demonstrations, actions, campaigns, or other bounded forms of activism. His preoccupation within movements is those which involve a "high-risk/cost". By which he refers to expenditures of time, money, and energy that are required of a person to engage in that movement. McAdam introduces a new factor that determines whether a certain individual will participate in a high-risk/cost activity which is called 'biographical availability'. This is a way of measuring the degree of personal constraints the individual has to overcome to participate. It could be personal and familial responsibilities that only they can fulfil which might restrict them from taking part in the high-cost activity. Ethan Zuckerman (2014) writes on very similar lines, where he calls "high-risk" activity as "thick" civic participation in which "your job is to figure out what needs to be done. Someone organising a thick campaign knows they have a problem to solve and recruits

participants as a way of finding possible solutions, as well as people capable of carrying out those solutions" (p.160). Contrary to this, in "thin" civic participation "your job is simply to show up: to the rally, to sign the petition, to change your profile picture. In thin engagement, someone else, presumably, has done the thinking and concluded that what's needed to persuade or to make a point is mass participation" (p.159).

To sum up the factors for participation, "Participants in high-risk/cost activism are expected to (a) have a history of activism, (b) be deeply committed to the ideology and goals of the movement, (c) be integrated into activist networks, and (d) be relatively free of personal constraints that would make participation especially risky" (McAdam, 1986, p.71). From the observations he found out that every participant was somehow linked to other people who were already a part of the movement, maybe as activists. This relationship with deeply embedded individuals, he calls "strong-ties", absorbs such individuals into their networks. His data showed that the more "critical friends"- who criticised the regime, one had the more likely they were to join the protest. As well as be committed to the ideology behind the movement.

Building on the above, McAdam borrows from sociologist Anthony Oberschall's "bloc recruitment", in which a movement's primary source of participants is a merger of already existing groups and organisations. Oberschall says that mobilisation does not occur through the recruitment of a large number of isolated and solitary individuals but is a merger of highly organised participants. McAdam summarises from his study of high-risk activism that, "An intense ideological identification with the values of the campaign acts to "push" the individual in the direction of participation while a prior history of activism and integration into supportive networks acts as the structural "pull" that encourages the individual to make good on his strongly held beliefs" (p.88).

Contrary to the scholars discussed above, Malcolm Gladwell (2010) claims that the internet by itself does very little for revolutionary participation of people. He says that pre existing strong-ties among people around reifies their networks online; but not so much vice-versa. He takes the example of the civil rights movement in the United States to explain this. He talks about how the commitment to the cause was so high that they were ready to face risks at a high cost, even of life. And to build that kind of solidarity over the internet is less to none. Gladwell (2010) continues to recall how the four college students who started the movement in Greensboro planned extensively before they actually went to the segregated lunch counter as a sign of protest. His emphasis was both on the solid intentions of the four youth and the support system that each provided for one another. Because in the real site, physical harm is a reality and risk that protestors take into account well before they actually appear at the site. This risk combined with building of support, he says, is lacking in online activism. And that this is also the reason why the internet cannot truly cause a revolution.

One can argue that there is a certain logic behind networks that form online. They either have to be known to each other offline, or have common interests or friends, or have similar political leanings. But these relationships, Gladwell (2010) would call “weak-ties”, are on which social media platforms like Facebook are built. They are good for getting people to sign a petition, or change their profile picture to rainbows, etc. that do not involve financial or personal risks- but are less effective for higher risk activisms that involve both. “Real activism”, he says, requires you to confront socially entrenched norms and practices. One issue that Gladwell addresses is the structure of these groups. The civil rights movement functioned inside a hierarchical set up where each person had an assigned task for which they were accountable. This is unlike the networked nature of online activism that relies on debate and consensus which are drawn out procedures unsuitable for time sensitive activity.

Social media, while it offers the impetus for action, does not sustain itself. This "weak-tie" relationship that internet networks offer, Gladwell says, is not a natural enemy of the status quo. He says, "It makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact. The instruments of social media are well suited to making the existing social order more efficient". Another example he cites is the unrest in Iran during the 2009 elections that was translated by many as a Twitter revolution. He claims that Twitter functioned as no more than a way for English media to know about the ongoings of the protests, and that it had contributed little to no benefit for the protestors on ground. It is clear that each of these scholars are echoing the same idea using different terminologies. McAdam's "high-risk and low-risk/cost activism" and Gladwell's "strong-ties and weak-ties" are overlapping categories which operate at different levels.

These categories and frameworks are particularly useful for this thesis to explain group formations and networks in social movements. Discourse on networked authoritarianism and news production through social media further informs and explains the cases studied in this thesis. Because the internet has become crucial for democratic exchange and dissent challenging the status quo, it has also faced severe crackdowns. In the next section, I introduce the control mechanisms that authorities in different countries have exercised, particularly internet shutdowns, in the face of social disturbances, of which protests are a big part. I also elaborate on the degrees or types of shutdowns, and the different people and sectors that are affected by such shutdowns.

1.3.1. Recent Global Events and State Responses

Top10VPN released a report (Woodhams & Migliano, 2021) measuring the global cost of internet shutdowns through an index that measures the financial consequences in real time as well as of previous years. The matter of interest to the study lies in India ranking number one, in the total

number of internet shutdowns in 2020, with up to 1,655 hours of blackouts, with bandwidth throttling of 7,272 hours, costing a total of 2,779.3 million USD. Within these cases, they find that blockages resulted in human rights violations such as the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of press. The major portion of these hours go to the 7 month long shutdown faced by Kashmir, after the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution, which granted some autonomy to the state. It is interesting to note that the UN declared internet access as a human right in 2016. Only in March 2020 was 2G mobile internet restored to Kashmir, making very little resultant difference with respect to connectivity. In 2021, India ranked second, only after Myanmar which experienced widespread citizen protests against a military coup in 2020. The year also saw a massive blackout at the site of the farmers' protest around the national capital in January. 4G mobile internet in Kashmir was only restored in early February this year. In this section I have illustrated with examples how internet shutdowns have impacted in India and other parts of the world.

The act of an internet shutdown allows for a peculiar insight into how governments imagine internet usage by its citizens. We live in a world where the internet is a necessity rather than a luxury. Not only is it used for information exchange and social interactions, but loss of connectivity could also cost businesses billions of dollars in lost commerce or opportunity. When a government order mandates for telecom companies to shut down access to the internet, it essentially disrupts networks built and sustained over the internet for a long period of time. Many reports (Kathuria et al., 2018; Taye, 2021) have found that the reasons cited by governing authorities for such blockades is rumour-mongering on social media that eventually lead to public unrest, and sometimes to violent protests. A report by Kathuria et al. (2018) for the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations reveals that "Administrators admitted the difficulty to keep order when provocative videos and photos were shared on social media. The justification of preemptive shutdowns was in anticipation of a law and order situation that could quickly go out of hand."

Another report (Taye, 2021) echoes the same findings, "some governments have attempted to justify shutdown orders by insisting they were to stop the spread of “fake news” or hate speech and incendiary or violence-inciting content”. India, which tops the list of most shutdowns in the world (Woodhams & Migiliano, 2021), justifies them as precautionary. In Manipur, state authorities justified the shutdown by observing that “social media has become a useful tool for rumour-mongers and is being used extensively to incite the public,” however, the report claims that there is little evidence to suggest that cutting off access has led to stopping violence in these areas.

To study internet blackouts, one must have some information on where these were implemented and how many times. As basic as this is, there is no absolute data set of such instances that can be curated, because many times official communications from governments about such orders do not reach the public domain. Access Now is an online advocacy group which defends and extends the digital rights of users at risk around the world. Their #KeepItOn report called ‘Shattered Dreams and Lost Opportunities’ (Taye, 2021) finds these shutdowns to be an extension and escalation of traditional forms of censorship. In 2020, they found that many governments had failed to confirm their internet shutdown orders leaving the affected populations to guess why they imposed this form of arbitrary censorship. Based on its interactions with the businesses affected by internet shutdowns in India, the ICRIER report finds that:

> Shutdown orders were officially communicated to telecom operators a day after the fact. Public notifications were few and far between, even in cases where they lasted for long durations. Interactions with businesses and individuals reveal that in the absence of public communication, such instances were treated as network failure and resources were disproportionately wasted in trying to identify reasons for the unavailability of Internet services.…Stakeholders reported a period of 2-6 hours of uncertainty, which could be easily

> avoided if communications were organised either through telcos or other broadcasting media. (Kathuria et al., 2018, p. 31)

Although civil society groups like Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC) and Access Now have documented these instances, their statistics are drawn from what reports are available in mainstream media, which are most likely incomplete, because of this lack of transparency. Both media and civil society rely on citizens to report on shutdowns, as they happen. However, under pressure from journalists and civil society groups, in Jammu and Kashmir, the administration was forced to publish internet shutdown demands and the political and legal justifications for the disruptions. But many instances continued to go unreported unless a lawsuit was filed for further details. This changed significantly after the case of Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India[3] (2020) which now mandates all shutdown orders to be made public, and be allowed to challenge in court. More about the case will be explored in the next chapter.

1.4 Types of Internet Shutdowns

Internet shutdowns have been categorised into two broad categories based on how much blockage of data flow there is. According to Access Now, governments have in the past used throttling, or mobile and broadband internet service shutdown, or both tactics in combination. Throttling of a connection is to slow down the speed of the internet, either to specific sites, apps, or segments of traffic; or to all of the internet, affecting both mobile and broadband connections. A complete shutdown on the other hand can cut access to mobile or fixed-line internet, or completely block access to platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp or Telegram. According to the latest report by Internet and Mobile Association of India, there are over 500 million active internet users in India, of

[3] Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India https://api.sci.gov.in/supremecourt/2019/28817/28817_2019_2_1501_19350_Judgement_10-Jan-2020.pdf

which 227 million users belong to rural areas. It also states that the mobile phone is the preferred device for accessing the internet, due to affordable devices and cheap data plans. Kathuria et al. (2018) observe that "…mobile networks were shut down more frequently than fixed lines. Administrators indicated that mobile networks were more impacted primarily because they are more widely accessible, and therefore potential for damage is higher. Only in very serious cases of agitation did administrators also shut down the fixed-line network". This preference increasingly puts mobile phone users at risk of their online networks being taken away. These booming numbers show why an internet shutdown can effectively seize communication channels of citizens across states.

In this tug between governments and its citizens, lie the middlemen- service providers and internet platforms. These entities usually are at the mercy of what the government mandates. In Vietnam, for instance, when Facebook refused to take down content that the government deemed illegal, the authorities throttled the platform for fifty days before the company caved in. Before this instance, Vietnam had introduced cybersecurity legislation that forces online platforms and others to store data locally, monitor and take down illegal content, and set up local offices in Vietnam. The #KeepItOn report (Taye, 2021), lists the options that companies have to consider when faced with such situations;

> These decisions are difficult, but all platforms have a duty to respect human rights and must always work within the principles of harm reduction. In the case of Vietnam, Facebook's compliance demonstrates that the company is more interested in maintaining its significant market presence than protecting the fundamental rights of the Vietnamese. Facebook's decision to act as an extension of the government's censorship and propaganda machine sets a dangerous precedent. (p.15)

Oftentimes this is the route that corporations take- whether one calls it helplessness or collusion with the state. The tactics deployed by the state leave little choice for telecom companies which want to run shop even under severe human rights restraints.

The internet kill switch has both legal and technical aspects to it. (Lessig & Zittrain, 2011, 3:15) Different countries have different capacities to be able to pull the plug. Certain infrastructural devices become more vulnerable to blackouts than others. The more centralised the flow of service is, like in Africa (9:25) where the monopoly legacy telecommunications company makes it easier to have control over the flow of data, which makes it more vulnerable. In November 2019, as a citizen response to petrol price hike in Iran, authorities ordered an internet shutdown that did not affect the functioning of local commerce and governance. This was possible because of the domestic infrastructure that the Iranian government put into place in the recent few years;

> Intentional centralisation over the years has enabled Iran's Government to take the country offline, as happened in November. The ability to conduct these shutdowns was the culmination of many developments in Iran's Internet infrastructure, including the development of a National Information Network (NIN) and the centralized control which permeates the Islamic Republic of Iran's system. (Article 19, 2020, p.12)

This domestic internet infrastructure hosted in Iran allowed for national banking, local applications, government websites and services to remain online, while global internet was cut off. This internet shutdown was possible only because of cooperation from Iran's various Internet Service Providers (ISPs). In November 2019, ISPs received a notice to comply from Iran's Communication Regulatory Authority (CRA), the regulatory body responsible for executing censorship and other Internet policies in Iran under the auspices of the Ministry of ICT. Such national security orders are mandatory and never challenged by ISPs, as mandated by Iran's vague national security laws. (p.17)

1.5 Players in an Internet Shutdown

An internet shutdown involves various levels of authority to order, enact, and ensure its implementation. This involves issuing ministerial orders, as mentioned earlier in the 'Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules, 2017, from the Secretary of State or Central ministries of Home. These orders are then relayed to Internet Service Providers who implement it. While ISPs are major stakeholders in this chain of events, they often have no say in the matter, especially for private ISPs. Defiance of such orders poses a risk to these service providers who often justify compliance with these requests as a matter of following local law, suggesting that they risk losing their licenses if they don't (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Many journalistic accounts (Deep, 2017) have revealed that private operators do not even receive written orders to shut down, but sometimes merely through a phone call. They also find that since, "The physical infrastructure that exists in a cell tower is expensive and needs to be protected from destruction. As such, the police and operators have an unspoken understanding that the latter will shut the internet off when they're told to" (Deep, 2017). Whereas, operators like BSNL, "generally survives internet shutdown orders for a longer duration mostly because many government officials have BSNL as their carrier. On top of that, the state-owned ISP has some internal due diligence to complete before it actually disables parts of its network at government request" (Deep, 2017).

Such a shutdown is followed by the closing of business centres, small and medium enterprises, online banking, tourism, hospitals, government and private offices, which depend upon internet connectivity, leading to the loss of tens of crores of rupees. Businesses that depend heavily on electronic transactions are exposed to severe consequences. (Deep, 2017; Kathuria, et al., 2018) The people within the territory of shutdown face the major impact, having little to no control on their everyday life, so much of which is dependent on digital connectivity. More often, shutdowns are

combined with the implementation of section 144 CrPC or curfew in that specified area. Under such conditions, the loss of digital connectivity is more pronounced, revealing the hardships to access everyday resources, like hospitals and healthcare, food services, and banking.

Apart from the economic impact, a policy document by Internet Society (2019), a global non-profit organisation includes technical impact of a shutdown, stated that, "When a complete Internet shutdown occurs in a given country, the technical impact can extend beyond the country's borders to the rest of the global Internet. Being part of an interconnected network means having responsibility towards the network as a whole, and shutdowns hold the potential to generate systemic risks". Even the speed of a network is dependent on traffic, noise and previous wiring, reiterating that the local and the global are interconnected (Chun, 2006). The human rights impact of a shutdown is more visibly discussed and championed by civil society groups and NGOs domestically and internationally who support the right to access to the internet. Many of these are global communities which have been at the forefront, talking about how internet blocks go well beyond their own borders. Organisations like Netblocks[4], Access Now[5], Software Freedom Law Centre[6], Internet Freedom Foundation[7], Article 19[8], and Turkey Blocks[9] are only a few whose consistent work online is helping us draw our attention to the ongoing and simultaneous internet shutdowns across the world.

The major players in an internet shutdown are:

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[4] https://netblocks.org/

[5] https://www.accessnow.org/

[6] https://sflc.in/

[7] https://internetfreedom.in/

[8] https://www.article19.org/

[9] https://turkeyblocks.org/

- Governments (Central and State Ministries, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Ministry of Information and Broadcast)
- Telecom Companies/ Internet Service Providers
- Private individuals/ general public and affected by the shutdown
- Commercial entities/ businesses affected by the shutdown
- Civil society organisations and NGOs

1.6 Research Question

My curiosity arises from the way in which governments across the world have resorted to using the Internet kill switch either as a precaution against violence or as a way to suppress ongoing collective mobilisation. The Indian government has used this tactic multiple times to stifle communication among peaceful dissenters and on occasions of violence or anticipation of it.

My attempt in this study is to investigate how internet shutdowns are used by authorities to restrict collective mobilisation capacity, and the larger impact it has on global networks and societies.

As I have mentioned earlier, the parties who are involved in an internet shutdown are many. And I have undertaken a **situational mapping** (Clarke, 2003) of these players in the event of an internet shutdown. They are the following:

The State:

- What are the imaginaries of the state on the capacities of the internet when it imposes such internet bans on information and connectivity?
- How does the state make the association between the occurrence of violence and internet connectivity?
- How is collective mobilisation by peaceful dissenters understood by the state?

- How do we understand projects like Digital India, which push for digitalisation against restrictive practices like internet shutdowns?

The People:

- How do state subjects organise their networks on the internet, and to what effect do they use it?
- What kind of losses do ordinary people (students, journalists, businesses) incur as a result of shutdowns?
- What is the everyday attitude and imagination of people towards the internet?

Civil Society:

- How do civil liberties activists and internet freedom activists view such bans?
- How does human rights get framed in the context of the right to communicate, and the right to information?

Telecom companies/Internet Service Providers

- What stakes do telecom companies and ISPs hold in an internet shutdown?
- What power do they wield in the occurrence of a shutdown?

I explore some of these questions in the following chapters, as I try to find answers to them through the specific case studies that I have chosen below.

1.7 Case Studies

I explore two cases of democratic protests in detail which were faced with internet shutdowns in India- the Anti-CAA protests and the Farmers' protest against the 3 contentious farm laws.

1.7.1 Anti-CAA protests

The Citizenship Amendment Act was passed on 11th December, 2019 amid high tensions regarding illegal immigration in the north-east states of India, especially Assam and Tripura. The act was amended to allow for fast-tracked citizenship for non-muslim refugees from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who faced religious persecution. This law was seen by many as unconstitutional and discriminatory, given that India is a secular nation. The National Register of Citizens (NRC), is an official record of citizens in the country which is meant to detect and detain illegal immigrants. The CAA, when placed alongside the NRC, raised concerns among citizens who are marginalized, who may not be able to provide necessary documentation despite being citizens of the country. The act further disadvantaged the Muslim community by not providing sufficient legal recourse to false or missing identification.

The day after the law was passed, protests broke out in Assam and neighbouring north-east states fearing a demographic and cultural shift that may be brought about by the act. In a few days students in Jamia Millia Islamia also staged protests which were met with a brutal police crackdown on students inside campus. These protests spread across every major city in the country in the next few days, where several incidents led to the imposition of curfews and internet shutdowns. In January, a large number of women came together for a peaceful sit-in protest in Shaheen Bagh, which was led by Muslim women in the area. Many violent attempts were made to thwart the momentum of the protests. In late February, riots broke out in the muslim-dominated north-east area of Delhi, where at least 50 people were killed.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March, 2020 put brakes on the resistance that was building in the country. As a result, there has been no changes made to the act, nor is it repealed at the time of submitting this thesis.

1.7.2 Farmers' protest

Farmers from across the northern region of the Indian subcontinent came together to oppose the 3 farm laws that had been passed by the central government in 2019. Farmers came in large numbers from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Bihar, and Jharkhand. Their initial target was to reach the national capital Delhi, but were stopped by the police force at the borders of the city. Instead of returning home, the farmers held a sit-in protest at the very borders of these places- which are now well known areas known as- Singhu, Tikri, and Gazipur.

There were several attempts made by the state to undermine the movement. This was done by framing farmers as Khalistani supporters on mainstream news media. Protestors were vilified and accused of receiving foreign funding and political support. Online solidarity from celebrities for the movement was responded with smear campaigns on social media. Coercive force was also used by the state through shutting down water and electricity to the protest sites. The Internet was blocked or shut down from time to time, and poor connectivity prevailed through most of the duration of the movement. Protestors fought through inadequate living conditions and communication difficulties.

Finally, on 19th November, 2021, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, announced the repeal of the 3 controversial laws that the farmers were protesting against. The repeal came into effect on 1st December, 2021 after the two houses of the parliament, and the President of India gave her assent to the repeal bill. The repeal followed over a year of sustained protests by farmers, particularly from Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, who were concerned that the laws would dismantle the Minimum Support Price (MSP) system and leave them vulnerable to exploitation by large corporations. This is regarded as a huge victory for the farmers whose perseverance and strength sustained the movement and achieved their goal.

1.8 Methodology

In this subsection, I would like to begin by saying that methodological processes that I mention here are diverse and complementary. I use these perspectives and approaches as tools to build a complex picture of what happens during an internet shutdown.

Ustun (2021) in her paper which examines Turkey's Gezi protests and Brazil's Vinegar Uprising through online networks of resistance observes that, the challenges with studying a network as a field, is that it becomes a "continuous space that does not presume proximity or even spatiality in a physical space". In order to overcome that, she situated herself as an ethnographer "embedded in a site composed of fixed and moving points including spaces, people, and objects". This method, called cartographic ethnography, "involves studying the digital infrastructure of networked movements up close and accounting for their human and non-human components, as well as their multilayered architectures". She borrows from Burrel (2009) and Lingel (2017) who also lay emphasis on looking at networked field studies as a complex process that is "not only linked to investigating separate communities and technologies, but also in accounting for both online and offline practices, and tracing the different platform, devices and sites that emerge within a community's socio-technical milieu". While I did not conduct a conventional ethnography for this study, I have borrowed this perspective to include not only the online lives of the subjects of my study but also the offline geographies they inhabit.

Perhaps the most suitable method that I found to address my thesis topic is "situational analyses" proposed by Clarke (2003). She borrows from, and in the process re-invents, grounded theory particularly at the postmodern turn. She finds that grounded theory, while starting from the particular contexts, makes its way into generalising theory. Clarke (2003), instead, foregrounds the

situatedness, complexities, multiplicities, instabilities, and contradictions of the situation. While any variation or difference is considered as “noise”, she says that it is these ambivalences through which we negotiate social life itself. The social processes of communication that I study in this thesis is an arena of competing ideas and actions occurring within unequal power structures. In the proposed method of situational analysis, there are three kinds of maps- situational maps, social worlds/ arenas maps, and positional maps. Situational maps lay out major human, non-human, and discursive elements in the research situation of concern and the relations among them. The social worlds/ arenas maps lay out all of the collective actors and the arenas of commitment within which they engage in the ongoing negotiations. This map helps interpret situations engaging collective action and its social organisational and institutional and discursive dimensions. Finally, positional maps lay out the positions taken and not taken in the situation of concern. Looking at situational maps particularly, the different actors that emerge are individuals, collectives, non-human elements, discursive constructions of human actors, discursive constructions of non-human actors, political/ economic elements, sociocultural/symbolic elements, temporal elements, spatial elements, major issues/debates, implicated/silent actors/actants, and other related discourses. These actors are considered to be dynamic, negotiating and repositioning with changes in the social situations. I position the stakeholders, who I mentioned earlier, as actors to examine their relations with each other and the spatial and technological negotiations that they make.

As reflected in my literature review, I draw on the concepts of network society, new social movements, state control of speech and expression, and networked authoritarianism to lay the foundation to my theoretical approach. As a part of my data collection, using grounded theory methodology, I have interviewed not only the people affected by shutdowns, but also looked at responses by state authorities, and reportage by journalists who have closely followed the issues of the protests mentioned. I also spoke to civil society groups who have championed the cause of

connectivity over the years. I look at the history of communication policy both in the national and international contexts, as well as the tensions that emerge from the global nature of such a communication technology.

Further along the thesis I offer macroscopic and microscopic views of networked movements. Chapter 2 deals with the ways in which digital governance has evolved along with the advancements in technology, both at the national and global level. I discuss here the framework of internet sovereignty which stands in stark contrast to the principles of the world wide web. This chapter also looks at the latest legal developments in the country regarding regulating the digital space. In Chapter 3, I deep dive into the first case study, the anti-CAA protests by studying newspaper articles that reported on shutdowns during the protests. I draw analyses from these reports to see the different ways in which shutdowns affected people across the country. This case study shows how shutdowns control both the flow of people and information. Chapter 4, I study the second case, the Farmers' protest of 2020-21, which resulted in the victory of the protestors against the union government. Drawing from in-depth interviews I learn how protestors overcame several repressive tactics that were put in place to deter them from pursuing their cause. I look at ways in which networks can sustain even under communication blackouts.

Chapter 2

Policy trajectories and ‘digital’ governance in India

In this chapter I look at how the internet has been regulated by various international governing bodies, and the regulatory frameworks that they recommend to nation states. Here, I also wish to set context to the discourses and deliberations that were happening in the late 20th century about how access to the internet came to be seen as a human right. In India, more recently, I take a look at the challenge posed by the case of Anuradha Bhasin vs Union of India to the extended communication shutdown in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019-20. The outcome of this judgment in January 2020 set a legal precedent to all communication blackouts that would be imposed thereon. This case offers a useful point of departure for us to understand how international governing frameworks and Indian policies have shaped the internet we experience in India today.

I will be using the idea of ‘internet sovereignty’ to explain how different countries differently imagine and govern the complex and multi-dimensional entity we know as the internet. This framing of the internet as a sovereign body emerges in tandem with technological developments of internet networks and infrastructures. I explore how different nations approach sovereignty vis a vis the internet, and situate India in this context. I also take a closer look at Indian policy documents and the building of digital public infrastructure (DPI) that is written into it. These massive projects embed infrastructure into policy, and promote the building of industry around this “common” communication good. I make the connection between internet governance and infrastructure by looking at internet sovereignty, control regimes, and digital policies in India. I do this by looking at the suspension of infrastructure to shut down dissenting voices.

2.1 History of communication policy

In the aftermath of World War II, the United Nations came into being as an international body for peacekeeping, promoting friendly relations among nations, and to lay foundations of individual freedoms and liberties (United Nations, n.d.). In December 1948, the UN General Assembly approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), consisting of articles dealing with civil and political rights; economic, social and cultural rights. This was a response to the immense human suffering and fascist atrocities perpetrated during World War II. This played a catalytic role in expanding the scope and domain of human rights to be elaborated and enshrined in binding international agreements. These rights address the protection of the individual against the arbitrary use of power by the state. These manifest in legal forms, ranging from "hard law" covenants to "soft law" declarations, guidelines, and recommendations. The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) institutionalized global governance of human rights, through a multitude of monitoring mechanisms, interpretation guides, and special rapporteurs– to help interpret internationally agreed rights, build capacity, and promote compliance. Additionally, there are national and regional human rights mechanisms that vary widely across countries. While Europe, the Americas, African countries, and Arab nations have institutions that uphold these rights, Asia has not achieved a consensus on a regime for human rights.

Despite these provisions and guidelines, Jørgensen (2014) says that global media policy still does not speak in right-based perspectives. She looks at how in communication policy, one can use four perspectives to reflect on human rights- through civil society, institutions, academics, and a business lens. A brief look at two of these– civil society and business lenses, also helps in signposting the way for this thesis.

First, let us look at how policy is shaped through civil society intervention. From 1975 to 1985 the campaign for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was raised at

UNESCO by the Non-Aligned Movement of UN countries (of which India was a part). The issues raised in this campaign were primarily concerned with the domination of Western media and news in the global sphere of communication. The NWICO not only had representation from countries but also civil society organisations across the board which pursued the issue of inequality in access to communication and the democratization of media. However, the NWICO movement was considered unsuccessful because of the criticisms and withdrawal of support by the United States and the United Kingdom which viewed the issue as a threat to freedom of press, free markets, and unrestricted flow of information.

As observed in this thesis, there have been multiple ways in which communication channels, especially the internet, continue to be leveraged by citizens to push back on unjust policies within their countries. Groups have used the internet to report on violations and to campaign across borders to reach global information networks and receive support to strengthen their case. Ironically, countries like India, which campaigned for the NWICO, have also been known to muzzle activists, journalists, and civil societies when domestic governance and security is challenged (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). Civil society organisations in India like the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), continue to fight legal battles through strategic litigations, and organisations such as Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC), Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), Centre for Internet Society (CIS) spread awareness through digital literacy campaigns and special projects.

The UN sought to solve many of the issues proposed in the NWICO debate through the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) which were conducted in Geneva in 2003, and in Tunis in 2005. Two controversies in the civil society arena came to light in these summits. First, it was the question of formulation of a ‘right to communicate’ as a human right. Some civil society groups argued that there was no need for a defined right to communicate, and that it could be met under the existing regime of rights; and would further undermine the existing framework of media freedoms.

The debate was resolved when there was consensus that there was no need to invent new legal standards for it, rather it can be called upon through existing human rights standards. The second controversy, which is more relevant in the context of this thesis, was the human rights versus development goals debate. A number of groups claimed that the issue of development through poverty reduction, economic and social development should take priority over individual human rights, while opposing groups had the view that human rights were the foundation for any society, independent of the level of development. In a country like India, where a significant population does not meet the basic standards of living, the fight for communication rights may seem misplaced or untimely. However, as Jørgensen (2014) finds, this is a 'perceived dichotomy', which in reality are intertwined with each other. As we will see further, citizens use channels of communication to appeal or challenge existing injustices and scarcities that may sometimes be imposed or ignored by the state. Often such resistance is faced with the suspension of communication rights, which in turn affects social and economic development.

Chun (2006) identifies that when the internet, originally running on computer infrastructure built by the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) was opened to the public, private telecommunication and cable companies began building the backbones of the internet. The entry of these actors– cable companies which were Internet Service Providers (ISPs)-- greatly altered the fundamental nature of the internet. The internet then became a "shopping mall"- a privately owned, publicly accessible space (p. 38). Moreover, Chun asserts, an invisible collusion between corporations and the government is at play, where the architecture of the internet makes it highly efficient for regulation, through code and commerce. This transformation, she says, poses the most significant challenge to democracy today.

This takes us to the other relevant perspective that Jørgensen (2014) offers is to look at communication rights through a business lens. While being a crucial player in enabling the

propagation of communication technologies, businesses are always under the purview of the state and the values that said regimes dictate. Often such values may conflict with human rights standards of freedom of expression and privacy. As a response to this, the Global Network Initiative (GNI)[10] was formed in 2008, as a multi stakeholder partnership among companies, technology leaders, civil society groups, and academics across the world. The GNI has developed a voluntary code of conduct for ICT companies which follow principles and guidelines related to freedom of expression and privacy. This leaves it up to companies to decide whether and how they will comply with human rights standards. Given the nature of global communication networks, that involves differing policies on communication governance across nations, private companies experience different levels of pressure to comply with national laws and regulations. Often these companies are also amicable to bending the GNI principles in their desire to expand their businesses. Companies such as Facebook have been found to play a major role in political events like elections, and mass mobilisation events. For example, in Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign, Cambridge Analytica used Facebook user data through third party apps to micro-target ads to voters to sway votes in favour of Trump (Lewis & Hilder, 2018). This increasingly puts the rights of "citizens" (who are primarily "users" in the eyes of corporations), in the hands of private companies located abroad. The transnational nature of the internet further complicates the way in which human rights standards can be preserved while complying with national legal cultures.

2.2 Internet Sovereignty

The internet in its inception had been thought by many as an ideal uniting virtual space which superseded, and even had the potential to erase national borders. And that it did not allow the law of

[10] A multistakeholder collaboration to protect freedom of expression and privacy in tech. https://globalnetworkinitiative.org/

the land to rule over the virtual activities of the people who belonged to it. But the geopolitics of the world that the internet is inevitably linked to tells a different story. Often, the materiality of the internet is overlooked, which actually forms the basis of the network. Combined with this, some authoritarian governments have put in place laws and regulations in a way that the materiality of the internet becomes stark. What was once thought to be a seamlessly continuous network grew fault lines in the global internet resulting in "balkanised" or sovereign internets. Oftentimes the reason cited by nations for such a move is a protection from cyber attacks, and preserving national sovereignty. Examples include Iran's National Information Network (NIN), the Chinese internet, and Russia's Runet. However, these are not the only countries which have taken this course. Other governments too have employed a variety of means to restrict free flow of communication across the Internet, including data localisation, internet shutdowns, and internet filtering, all of which effectively cut off parts or entire states from global networks.

2.2.1 Geopolitics of the Internet

The internet in its contemporary form, as a global network linking individuals and institutions across countries, marked a radical departure from earlier modes of communication and social organisation. During the late 20th century this gave rise to a lot of utopian ideas about how the internet erased physical borders and eliminated the need for a government. The idea of the internet as a borderless space gave rise to many cyber-utopic imaginations, of which the "Cyberspace Manifesto" by John Perry Barlow (1996) finds prominence.

Cyberspace is, however, not a natural phenomenon, but a historical and political one, and as such, is subject to influence by social and political systems and actors. Among political entities, nation-states are of paramount importance (Guarino & Iasiello, 2017). When you look at the history of the

internet, it is not as seamless and continuous as you would imagine. As early as 1999, China had started talking about filtering the online content that their citizens had access to. In 2003, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was convened by the UN General Assembly to address the digital divide between rich and poor countries. They agreed that it was a matter of international responsibility to bridge this divide. In the second summit held in Tunisia, a consensus was reached to take a multi stakeholder approach to govern the internet. As a result, the Internet Governance Forum was formed, where governments shared policy debates with private sector and civil society groups. This was however not accepted by China, who wanted an international body like the International Telecommunication Union to oversee matters of the global internet, while governments would be the final authority within the state. In 2010, China issued a white paper explaining the "Internet sovereignty of China" as meaning that "within Chinese territory the Internet is under the jurisdiction of Chinese sovereignty" (Powers, 2014). All persons and organizations operating within Chinese territory are expected to follow China's Internet laws and regulations, the white paper said. In the second World Internet Conference 2015, held in Wuzhen, China, president Xi Jinping promoted his concept of "Internet sovereignty", urging the world to "respect each country's Internet sovereignty, respect each country's right to choose their own development path and management model of the internet" (Powers, 2014).

One of the criticisms with this framing is that the internet moves away from being a global network towards a tightly bound, nationally governed space. However, this framing also highlights the disproportional order of the global internet where western cultural and corporate hegemony is imposed on developing countries in the global south.

2.2.2 Infrastructure of the Internet

The idea that cyberspace cannot be governed is based upon another idea that the internet does not belong to any specific physical place, but its soft and hard infrastructure is distributed across

geographies, and in this regard, the “cloud” is an oft-used metaphor. Let’s dismantle two misconceptions: first, the internet is not in the air, and neither is it always wireless. In fact more than 90% of the internet is wired. There are physical submarine fibre optic cables that run under the sea, criss crossing continents. Satellite technology is responsible for a very small load of the whole internet, it only complements the existing physical infrastructure connected through wires. These cables are responsible for the transmission of 99% of all international data. So, not only is the expression “cloud” misleading, but it is indeed under the earth, or in the sea. Since these wires occupy physical geographic space, they in turn become entities to be governed by nation-states. Not only do they become governable, but demand to be governed by the reinforcement of physical sovereign borders of nations within which these materials are situated (Guarino, 2015). It is therefore essential to examine the material dimensions of the internet and their varied implications across national borders.

Leading scholars of infrastructure studies refocus the materiality of information as a pertinent aspect of studying information ecology. Starosielski (2012), finds that it is through ‘disruption’ that infrastructures become visible and shatter the imagination of the powerful and stable network. Starosielski (2012) describes how disruptions such as shutdowns can become potential sites of censorship and political intervention. In order to study shutdowns, infrastructure studies is a useful lens to examine systems of control.

Pertinent to the physical nature of these optic fibres, the availability of raw materials for building this infrastructure and where they can be built concerns itself with the geopolitics of the world. For most of us, as users of the internet, we need to work backwards to the foundations of the internet- demystifying the idea of an invisible all encompassing internet, to a very fundamentally material infrastructure that makes the internet possible. For instance, erbium, a rare-earth, silvery metal which is the core raw material to manufacture signal repeaters on these optical fibres is majorly

produced in China, followed by Russia and Brazil. This gives these countries greater bargaining power in the internet arena. Secondly, the very layout of cables implies a distribution of power among states. It is important to point out that these underwater cables do not connect all countries equally. The most densely connected areas are the USA and the UK, through the Atlantic route. Communication between continents like South America or Africa have to pass through a waypoint in the USA. Thirdly, data centres which are focal points of internet networks, which provide storage and routing consume massive amounts of energy, especially for cooling the systems. The importance of geographical location comes again to the fore because it is more economical to place these facilities in relatively cold climates, putting some countries to a disadvantage, because of the need for closely available energy sources.

Scholarship on media and communication infrastructures has underscored the importance of material, political, and geographical systems (Parks, 2015). As seen here, the material infrastructure– like satellites, cables, and data centres, are not neutral but are deeply implicated in power relations and geopolitical struggles. Mukherjee (2020) pushes this idea further by looking at infrastructures, like mobile networks or digital platforms as lived environments. These environments embody a paradox, where they promise empowerment and economic growth, but at the same time expose citizens to precarious access and intensify vulnerability. Thomas (2019) mirrors similar contradictions in his study of digital public infrastructures in India. Where infrastructures of social change can quickly become systems of control. Thus, Mukherjee (2020) and Thomas (2019) look at these technological systems as contested arenas which express anxieties of control and repression.

2.2.3 Three generations of Internet censorship and control

Not only does resource inequality play a role in the nature of internets across the world, but also on the governments which decide how their internets should function. Ron Diebert and Rafal

Rohozinski (2010) in their book surveying Internet censorship and control around the world, warn of a global trend. They say that previously, in order to manage cyberspace, governments made policies and practices aimed at denying access to content. Instead, now, they are using methods that seek to normalize control and the exercise of power in cyberspace through a variety of means. Diebert and Rohozinski divide the techniques used by governments for Internet censorship and control into three "generations" (MacKinnon, 2010):

> The first generation of techniques focuses on "Chinese style" Internet filtering and Internet café surveillance. Second generation techniques include the construction of a legal environment legitimizing information control, informal requests made by authorities to companies for removal of information, technical shutdowns of websites and computer network attacks. Third generation techniques include warrantless surveillance, the creation of "national cyberzones," state-sponsored information campaigns, and direct physical action to silence individuals or groups. (MacKinnon, 2010, p.26-27)

Lessig (2006) considers this regulation unsurprising, as the architecture of cyberspace itself makes it inherently regulable. Interestingly, he says (2006) that these regulations are highly malleable and can change form (increase or decrease control) based on what the government decides it wants the internet to look like.

2.2.4 Territorial Internet: How is it achieved?

This combination of material shortcomings and governments' own restrictions, pushes us further to look at internets as territorial entities. Munn (2020) looks at some of the many ways in which nations achieve cyber sovereignty through territorialization. Firstly, data localisation. Information is housed in data centres located inside the borders of the nation-state. As a result of this

understanding, governments are placing companies under increased pressure to store and process this data in domestic data centres. China's cybersecurity law, a rough analogue of Europe's General Data Protection Regulation, requires data by critical infrastructures to remain within their territory. A site, service, or platform is further coupled to the nation by the personal data that it leverages. This data is not generic nor abstract, but represents the highly intimate and highly valuable details of their citizens. (Munn, 2020)

The second mode of control is the shutdown of the internet, which enables governments to frame it as 'our' internet. This framing ties digital networks not only to the geography of the nation but also to the authority of state power. Sovereignty therefore becomes tangible through shutdowns, showing the state's capacity to exert control over infrastructure by switching off entirely. (Munn, 2020)

Lastly, filtering the internet by content. Filtering information is considered a more sophisticated intervention in opposition to the killswitch. Russia and China stand as prime examples in this respect. While justifying filtering as a response to foreign attacks, these countries exercise extensive degree of control on the content of their internets (Munn, 2020).

Here are a few more factors that have prompted countries like China and Russia to develop national internets. Russia has not only been wary of cyber attacks, but they themselves have indulged in the same, on Estonia for example. Both China and Russia oppose the cultural influence that the west holds in the internet arena, and are cautious of it. They would therefore like to regulate what their citizens are exposed to. Their primary concern is also to offer counter platforms to US– giants like Facebook and Google, with Chinese versions like WeChat and Baidu, respectively. Transnational social media corporations have a huge amount of personal data on its users. By localising data centres, for example, governments could have direct access to this information. The United States is also wary of Chinese platforms in the same way. Over 170 million Americans use TikTok, which

the US government feared "could be used by China as a tool for spying and political manipulation" (Jamali, 2025). Either a sale to an American buyer or a ban on the platform are the possible outcomes to this situation. Another reason governments would prefer to have localised internets is to cut off information from within the countries to reach international media. In Iran for example, when citizens protested the petrol hike in 2019 (Article 19, 2020), a shutdown was issued so no communication could reach the outside world. This effectively contained the outrage within the country.

For China, cyber sovereignty is a part of the larger field of information security which is critical for maintaining its core values. China's concept of cyber sovereignty reflects a broader effort to to shape and control discourses about the country, nation, and the Party (Schia, 2017). According to them, a sovereign state has the rights to (1) control transboundary information, (2) to regulate and manage how information flows in and out of a country as well as jurisdiction over disputes arising in this context, and (3) to share information based on international cooperation (Schia, 2017).

Shutdowns, on the other hand, generally result in severe financial losses, due to unavailable services and loss of communication with global partners and supply chains. Iran, however, has spent recent years building a NIN National Information Network (a type of national Internet), which hosts a number of key services and government functions. While access to the global Internet was cut off, domestic Internet services (hosted on the NIN), such as national banking, local applications, government websites and services, remained online. This minimised losses and kept the government functioning nearly as normal throughout the shutdown. (Article 19, 2020)

2.3 Digital policy in India

The government of India, in 2014, through the Department of Electronics and Information Technology launched a flagship programme called Digital India[11], with a vision to transform India into a 'digitally empowered society and knowledge economy'. The official press release on the announcement of this programme states that "Even though India is known as a powerhouse of software, the availability of electronic government services to citizens is still comparatively low". It emphasized that this programme would ensure that government services are available to citizens electronically, and that this is intended to bring public accountability through mandated delivery of government services electronically.

A similar intention is reflected in another initiative by the government of India called BharatNet[12] (formerly known as National Optical Fibre Network). In 2012, this project was undertaken by a government statutory body called the Universal Service Obligation Fund, under the Department of Telecommunications (DoT), Ministry of Communications. The USO Fund was established with the fundamental objective of providing access to telegraph services, including mobile services, broadband connectivity and ICT infrastructure creation in rural and remote areas. The USOF website claims that BharatNet is one of the biggest rural telecom projects in the world.

The objective of BharatNet is to enable access providers like mobile operators, Internet Service Providers (ISPs), Cable TV operators, content providers to launch various services such as applications like e-health, e-education and e-governance in rural and remote India. So far, 207,989 Gram Panchayats (local governing bodies at the village level) are connected through the BharatNet project and 669,751 Km of Optical Fibre Cable has been laid. Additionally, 782,366 Fibre-To-The-

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[11] Official website of Digital India https://www.digitalindia.gov.in/about-us/

[12] Official website of BharatNet https://usof.gov.in/en/bharatnet-project

Home (FTTH) connections are commissioned and 104,675 Wi-Fi hotspots are installed to ensure last-mile connectivity (Universal Service Obligation Fund, n.d.).

While policies and projects involving massive communication infrastructure are encouraged by the state, it is done primarily for the purpose of efficient governance. Establishing digital networks to remote rural India serve clearly defined goals for the project of Digital India. The vision areas outlined by this project attempts the following (Digital India, n.d.):

Firstly, it states that digital infrastructure is a core utility to every citizen. Every citizen should have access to high speed internet for the delivery of services. Every citizen should have a "cradle to grave digital identity that is unique, lifelong, online and 'authenticable' to every citizen". Through mobile phones and online banking, citizens are enabled to participate in digital and financial life, and gain easy access to the Common Service Centre. These centres are access points for delivery of government to citizen e-services, to make service delivery mechanisms transparent and to reduce citizens' effort in visiting government offices.

Secondly, the Digital India project aims to disburse services on demand for efficacy of governance, by seamlessly integrating services across departments or jurisdictions. It will also ensure all citizen entitlements will be available on cloud, by making services available in real time from online and mobile platforms. The project aims to make financial transactions electronic and cashless. The project also intends to leverage GIS (geospatial information systems) to help make decisions for support systems and development.

Thirdly, the project aims to digitally empower citizens through digital literacy, and to provide universally accessible digital resources, and to make these available in Indian languages.

2.3.1 Digital divide

The need for large scale government projects such as BharatNet and Digital India is the massive divide that exists between people who are connected to the internet and those that are not. This entire program seems to be a noble cause given the digital divide in India is a living reality for nearly half the population of the country. The divide mirrors the existing socio-economic inequalities in Indian society where the most marginalised groups have been the least digitised. This project would benefit populations that are deprived of government services due to lack of internet access.

One can benefit from seeing the flip side of networked communities as well, by looking at those peoples and places that have not received telecommunication services. In India, it has been reported (Kemp, 2024) that about 683.7 million (or 47.6%) people are not connected to the internet. The digital divide in the country is immense, and there are a number of attempts being made by the government to bridge this gap, as discussed above. Governments and civil societies have highlighted the benefits that citizens can avail through digitised governance and education. Thus, the internet is framed as not only desirable but also necessary in the country as many government schemes and public services are now digitally enabled, with the government pushing for a "Digital India" that presumes the widespread availability of internet access.

A cautionary tale, and also a technical observation Chun (2006) makes is that wireless technology dominates countries in the global south, which is also a result of geopolitics. This jump to the latest infrastructures is viewed as technological "leapfrogging"- moving immediately towards more advanced technologies- leaves those people more vulnerable to control and surveillance. When earlier technologies are bypassed for new centralized infrastructures (like Aadhar, UPI), it makes it easier for the state to monitor and control its citizens. This is reflective in the way that the 6G wireless standard is being promoted by the Government of India for telecommunication and rural

development. The mission is to be at the forefront of this technological innovation globally, and to enable access to required information, resources, and social services without constraints of time and physical location (Bharat 6G Vision, 2023). With Bharat Net and 6G initiatives, there is an expectation that tech based solutions will address socio-economic problems. As a result, communication technology infrastructure gets written into policy for social change and development.

In 1975, the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment or SITE was launched in India. This was largely a technological experiment which also met educational, agricultural, and healthcare needs of the people living in rural parts of the country. SITE in the 1970s and Digital India in the contemporary times, can both be framed as state-led technological interventions designed to bridge information gaps and advance development.

2.3.2 Internet shutdowns during civil protests

One can see from these initiatives that there is a lot of encouragement from the state for the citizens to go digital. However, it is interesting to note that India has been shutting down the internet in the face of minor disturbances, and sometimes violent unrest. Some of these shutdowns were placed to avoid cheating during government examinations. And many of these have been during citizen protests and during instances of anticipated violence or dissent. (Taye, 2021)

Using internet shutdowns as a way to control civil unrest is common in India. More recently, it has become frequent for governments to clamp down on the internet during social unrest. Historically across the world, communication blackout is not a new tactic (Tufekci, 2016; Article 19, 2020). In India, the anti- Citizenship Amendment Act protests in late 2019, and early 2020, was one such period that saw many shutdowns across multiple cities, simultaneously. This severe crackdown on

the internet was criticised by many international watchdogs (Amnesty International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Later that year, we saw the Farmers Protest, where a majority of farmers in the northern part of India dissented to the unconstitutionally introduced farm laws, through a sit-in protest near the national capital, Delhi.

When we look at these two actions by the government- one, to digitise governance (as seen with initiatives such as Digital India, and BharatNet) and provide connectivity to all citizens to digitally empower them allow for the participation in networked economy; and two, to disrupt these very connections when citizens use networks to express dissent. Placed together, these look like opposing forces, incompatible with each other. The Indian state's impetus for the digital is to achieve efficient governance, and to provide each of its citizens with a digital identity. However when citizens use the internet to collectivise or mobilise against unjust state policies, these same networks are shut down.

Here are some other activities in the Indian policy realm which point to internet regulation enshrined in the Indian law. These address legal provisions and discussions concerning the regulation of both content and infrastructure of the internet. Some of them are as follows.

1. **The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023**

For the first time in India, digital privacy of individuals in the country has been directly addressed through this Act. This Act aims to increase accountability for businesses in handling Indian citizens' data. It demands that entities that collect and process data (data fiduciaries) are collecting personal data with clear, informed, and revocable consent from individuals. While ensuring transparency, purpose limitation, data security, and accountability of said data. It also mentions the rights given to individuals and children about their own data. The act states that cross-border data transfer may happen freely, unless specifically restricted through black-listing by the government. Additionally,

Data Protection Board of India (DPBI) an independent body will be formed to enforce the law, handle grievances, and impose penalties. Although the DPDP Act received the President's assent, and is notified in the official gazette, the legislation has still not been enforced because of some procedural aspects of the Act, like the DPBI, that need more clarity (Economic Times, 2025).

2. **Draft Data Centre Policy, 2020**

This policy framework from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY) is aimed at establishing a data centre ecosystem in India that is robust and sustainable, making it a global data centre hub. The policy would designate data centres as "infrastructure" instead of "industry" which will make credit easily accessible for businesses. Fiscal and non-fiscal incentives, special land parcels, and data centre economic zones would be provided with municipal supplies to encourage investors. Several Indian states, like Telangana, Maharashtra, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, and many others already have their own data centre policies, incentivising sustainable practices, and subsidising indigenous technology to attract investors.

3. **Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Ethics Code) Rules, 2021**

These rules were introduced to hold social media intermediaries more accountable, by mandating platforms to have a grievance redressal mechanism by forming a body of a Chief Compliance Officer, a nodal contact person, and a Resident Grievance Officer. They are expected to acknowledge complaints received within 24 hours, and resolve it within 15 days. A monthly report of all complaints filed and actions taken should be submitted to the government. Platforms have been asked to double their data retention period of up to 6 months. Messaging platforms, even if end-to-end encrypted, are asked to find the "first originator" of forwarded messages. The Chief

Compliance Officer is expected to reside in the country and take personal liability in cases where the intermediaries are unable to comply with these rules.

4. **Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2023**

The additions made to the Rules include the formation of a government fact checking unit (FCU) which is responsible for identifying 'fake, false, or misleading' online content and notify intermediaries to take down such content. In case the intermediaries fail to comply, they risk losing their safe harbour protections. They will be held liable in a court proceeding for any third-party information hosted on their platform. These changes grant excessive control on online content to the government and can be highly detrimental to free speech. Even if the intent is to curb misinformation, the rules are an overreach of law and potentially suppresses dissenting voices.

As seen in discussions on internet sovereignty, controlling physical infrastructures of the internet is the primary way through which states assume sovereignty. The intention behind large infrastructure projects do not explicitly show signs of building of national internet networks. However, when placed alongside the trends of shutdowns, one can see the foreshadowing of increasing control over the internet. There seems to be a grey area where on the one hand there is a drive to make India 'digital' and universally accessible to its citizens; and on the other, to inhibit and take control of online networks and freedoms when it is inconvenient for the ruling government. In any case, there is a growing tendency towards control regimes that is reflected in internet governance in the country.

A turning point in the legality of imposing internet shutdowns in India was marked by the ruling of the Supreme Court in Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India. The judgment mandated that shutdown orders must be temporary, proportionate, and subject to judicial review. This landmark case thus

laid down procedural safeguards against arbitrary restrictions, making it a historic milestone in the legal discourse on digital rights in India.

2.4 Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India

In August 2019, the state of Jammu and Kashmir was put under total communication shutdown after the abrogation of Article 370. This meant that the special status granted to the state of having a separate constitution, a state flag, and autonomy of internal administration, would be revoked. Further, the state was to be bifurcated into two Union Territories- Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. In this political context, media and telecommunication blackouts were imposed as a pre-emptive measure against possible violence that the abrogation announcement might trigger (BBC News, 2019). This blackout lasted for an unprecedented duration of 7 months, before any meaningful connectivity was restored. In the beginning, according to SFLC[13], landlines were also restricted, which were eventually lifted, but mobile data was still unusable. 2G mobile internet services for whitelisted websites were restored in January 2020, which were snapped again on account of security reasons for the Indian Republic Day. In February 2020, only 2 districts, Udhampur and Ganderbal had access to 4G internet on verified sims, and 2G services in the remaining districts. While the Union Territories were under these conditions, the country was to go into complete Covid lockdown in March 2020. Complete access to 4G services in Jammu and Kashmir was restored in February 2021, 552 days after no to low internet. As a result, the people residing in the union territories were not only facing a global pandemic, but also had little access to safety information, and health care services (InternetShutdowns.in, n.d.).

[13] https://internetshutdowns.in/static-page/jammu-kashmir/#main-intro-spacing

Under these circumstances, Anuradha Bhasin, the executive editor of Kashmir Times challenged the interminable communication shutdown placed by the Government of India at the time as unconstitutional. Through the writ petition filed by Anuradha Bhasin and Ghulam Nabi Azad, former Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) in the Supreme Court of India, they challenged the communication shutdown and the restriction on movement and public gatherings as curbing rights of citizens. In the following paragraphs, I borrow directly from the case file released from the proceedings of this case (*Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India, 2020*).

It was argued in court by the petitioners that the suspension of the internet (mobile and landline), brought a grinding halt to the activities of print media, which are absolutely essential for modern press. That the suspension also was a restriction on right to free speech, and should be tested on the basis of reasonableness and proportionality. Since the order was passed using the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency of Public Service) Rules, 2017, the restrictions should have been of a temporary nature. The order at the time was unspecific regarding the duration of the suspension. Further, mobile and telephone lines were restricted, a move which was considered to be beyond what the suspension rules allow. While there can be some restrictions, this amounts to a complete ban. The petitioners also argued that the order was not in compliance with the procedure prescribed in the rules, and that the order did not contain the reasoning as to the necessity of the restrictions. It was also noted that the suspension was placed in apprehension of likelihood of danger to a law and order situation. The counsel to the petitioners said that public order is not the same as law and order, stating that Section 144, CrPC can only be used against specific people or groups, and cannot be passed to the public generally. That it is necessary for the State to identify persons causing the problem, and that the entire state could not be brought to a halt. Taking examples of orders passed in Bihar, and Jammu and Kashmir in 2017, where only social

media websites were banned, the counsel focussed on the “least restrictive measure” that can be passed.

In response, the Solicitor General of Jammu and Kashmir, Tushar Mehta, submitted that the internet was never restricted in the Jammu and Ladakh regions. And that social media allowed people to send messages and communicate with a number of people at the same time, which could be used as a means to incite violence. And the purpose of the restriction was to ensure the situation on ground would not be aggravated by targeted messages from outside the country. Combined with the apprehension of the spread of fake news, and false images to spread violence, the ban was put in place. The Solicitor General also noted that the jurisprudence on free speech relating to newspapers cannot be applied to the internet, as both the media are different. While newspapers allowed one to many communication, the internet allows for two way communication by which spreading of messages is very easy. Referring to the suggestion of banning certain websites instead of a blanket ban, they responded that such a measure was attempted earlier in 2017, and was not successful.

The Supreme Court bench acknowledged the events following up to the shutdown and de facto curfew that was in place from 5th August 2019. Referring to the petitioners’ arguments, the bench notes that while the petitioner does not challenge any specific order of the government restricting the freedom of the press or restricting the content of the press; the cumulative effects of various other restrictions, such as the imposition of section 144 Cr.P.C. and the restriction on internet and communication, has indirectly affected the freedom of press in the valley. The Supreme Court bench in this case issued the following directions, which are summarized here:

a. The Respondent State/ competent authorities are directed to publish all orders in force- like section 144 Cr.P.C., and suspension of telecom services so that citizens can challenge it in appropriate forums.

b. The bench declared that the freedom of speech and expression (Article 19(1)(a)) and freedom to practice any profession or trade, business or occupation (Article 19(1)(g)) is a constitutional right granted with restrictions mentioned under Article 19(2) ad 19(6) inclusive of the test of proportionality.

c. The indefinite suspension of internet services is impermissible under the Temporary suspension Rules, 2017. They can be made only for a temporary duration.

d. Orders must adhere to the principle of proportionality, and must not extend beyond a necessary duration.

e. Any order suspending internet under Suspension Rules is subject to judicial review based on the parameters set out herein.

f. As the Suspension Rules do not provide for a periodic review, the review committee constituted under Rule 2(5) must conduct a periodic review every 7 days.

g. State/ competent authorities must review all orders suspending the internet forthwith.

h. All orders that are not in accordance with the law laid out, must be revoked.

i. State/ concerned authorities should consider allowing government websites, localised/ limited e-banking, hospital and other essential services where internet is NOT likely to be restored immediately.

j. The danger contemplated under section 144 Cr.P.C., should be in the nature of an "emergency", and for the purpose of preventing obstruction and annoyance or injury to any person lawfully employed.

k. Power of section 144 Cr.P.C. should not be used to suppress legitimate expression of opinion or grievance or exercise of any democratic right.

l. Orders passed under section 144 Cr.P.C. should state material facts to enable judicial review.

m. While executing section 144 Cr.P.C., the District Magistrate should balance rights and restrictions, based on principles of proportionality, and apply the least intrusive measure.

n. Repetitive orders under section 144 Cr.P.C. would be an abuse of power.

o. State/ authorities should review the need for continuance of any existing orders passed under section 144 Cr.P.C. in accordance with the law laid down above.

On January 10th, 2020 this judgement was passed by the Supreme Court of India setting a legal precedent for the implementation of internet shutdowns, access to information and speech freedoms. Although the cases of internet shutdowns that I explore in the thesis are of a different nature and occurred under different circumstances, the judgement that came out of this case becomes very relevant to all instances of shutdowns in the country. As seen above, the court laid out explicitly the ways in which the state can and cannot use the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services Rules, and Section 144 of the CrPC.

The two cases of shutdowns I explore in this thesis occurred as a result of citizen protests, and the incidents that followed the demonstrations. The anti-CAA protests took place between December 2019 and March 2020, which is before the Supreme Court delivered this judgement. The next chapter which looks at news reports covering shutdowns during the anti-CAA protests shows the inconsistency of law and regulation and a lack of accountability from police personnel and government authorities. The second case I explore, which is the farmers' protest near Delhi-NCR spanned over 2020 and 2021 happened after the judgement was passed.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we looked at government regulation and the trajectories it has taken, both, globally and in India. I also look at the theories of censorship regimes and how the internet is shaped and experienced differently based on your location. A macroscopic view of the internet reveals the digital sovereignty debate that nations battle with every development that information technologies undergo. This chapter grounds the internet in real world place and time, and how regulation affects and is affected by both aspects. With the Supreme Court's ruling in the Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India, one can see the continuously changing landscape of regulation in the country. The enthusiasm for infrastructural projects and the ongoing debates on data privacy, data sovereignty and platform regulation illustrates the complexities of governing digital ecosystems in ways that balance innovation, security, and public interest.

The latest developments in the digital sovereignty arena, Grohmann & Barbosa (2025) observe, is the appropriation of the concept by big tech platforms like Amazon, Microsoft and Google. These platforms combined represent over two-thirds of the cloud computing market share, and have turned sovereignty into a service that can be sold to governments and individuals. Digital Sovereignty Pledge, Microsoft Cloud for Sovereignty Program, and Digital Sovereignty Explorer are services launched by Amazon, Microsoft, and Google respectively. These are a response to the recent digital policies and discourses around sovereignty, especially in Europe. These services are aimed at providing compliance with a country's policies and greater control of infrastructures by customers, governed by local law. They market sovereignty as a sellable technological solution to the changing digital policies. Such developments show that digital policy tends to always lag behind market logic and technological progress.

Chapter 3

Control regimes and resistance in anti-CAA protests in India

In this chapter, I examine the anti Citizenship Amendment Act protests that took place in December 2019, and early 2020 until the Covid-19 lockdown was enforced in March 2020. The protests occurred simultaneously throughout the country over these months. I analyse the occurrences of internet shutdowns, by examining newspaper reports from two English dailies- The Hindu, and The Indian Express. The timeline that I am focusing on is largely when protests gained momentum in December of 2019 and lasted till March 2020, when the nationwide lockdown was announced. The incidents of reported shutdowns however, are concentrated in December 2019, even though protests were in full swing much longer, until the announcement of the Covid lockdown in March.

This chapter firstly sets a global context to communicative control regimes during incidents of protests and mass upheaval. I briefly bring to your attention how democratic dissent has been restricted across the world through selected examples. I discuss internet shutdowns in India, and acknowledge some of the longest shutdowns that have occurred in Jammu and Kashmir, and Manipur. Next, I set context for my case study on the anti Citizenship Amendment Act, and provide the findings and analysis of the case.

As discussed earlier, successful protest movements thrive on effective communication. Today, we gather and organise ourselves through digital communication channels- over social networks, messaging platforms, and microblogging sites. However, these channels of communication are fragile and subject to state control. Across the world, whenever citizens have threatened the status

quo, questioned those in power, or held the state accountable for corruption and malpractice, there have been severe crackdowns on information communication channels. Whether it is to restrict news flow, or to prevent citizens from mobilising against the state, censorship and blackouts have been popular tools of choice for authorities. According to Access Now, of all the protest- related shutdowns in 2022, 19 disproportionately impacted entire countries. However, the majority of these were imposed at either the regional (17) or local (25) levels, representing targeted, aggressive attempts to conceal human rights abuses and dismantle protest movements (Rosson, Anthonio & Tackett, 2023).

The UN Special Rapporteur, Clément N. Voulé, in his presentation to the Human Rights Commission in 2021 observes that the number of governments using shutdowns as a measure to contain mass demonstrations continues to grow. This trend is not only restricted to authoritarian governments but has become a tactic often used by long-standing democracies and more recent democracies as well. The report (Voulé, 2021) says, “In Latin America, for example, shutdowns were recorded only in Nicaragua and Venezuela as of 2018, but since then, Colombia, Cuba and Ecuador have reportedly adopted shutdowns in connection to mass protests”. The longest such shutdown which followed a people’s demonstration, happened in Bangladesh’s Cox Bazar Rohingya refugee camps. The shutdown impacted over 900,000 people in the camps and went on for 355 days. Several factors led up to this shutdown: firstly, there was a repatriation attempt between Myanmar and Bangladesh, secondly, a peaceful demonstration remembering the second anniversary of the Myanmar military’s ethnic cleansing campaign in Rakhine State (“Genocide Day”) on 25 August 2019, thirdly, a local politician was murdered allegedly by Rohingya refugees, following which law enforcement authorities killed 4 refugees allegedly linked to the murder. This shutdown coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, which left the residents of these camps totally uninformed about the global pandemic (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Ethiopia too

had a severe nation-wide shutdown in June-July of 2020 that affected over a 100 million people. This too was a response to a citizen protest, which was held to protest against the murder of Oromo musician-activist, Haacaaluu Hundeessa. In 2020, Belarus announced a shutdown when citizens protested the declaration of the incumbent President, Alexander Lukashenko's victory in the year's elections. Specific censorship of websites and apps by authorities allowed for more subtle and sophisticated methods of silencing dissent, as opposed to a blanket shutdown. On the day of the election, "the Belarusian government first blocked YouTube, and shortly after, WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber, Vkontakte, and other social media platforms" (Taye, 2021, p.22). As of February 2023, the report notes that in Belarus,

> "For the next 121 days, authorities continued to shut down mobile networks, block websites and social media, and throttle mobile data, in particular on Sundays when Belarusians regularly held demonstrations. This has severely impacted the free flow of information in Belarus. December 6, 2020 marked the first day since the internet and information disruptions started in August that the government did not impose a mobile shutdown in Belarus, but Telegram and other VPNs were still blocked. The protests continue, and it is not clear when Belarus will stop deliberately interfering with internet access and communications" (Taye, 2021, p.23).

In 2021, governments across the world continued to use internet shutdowns to suppress citizen protests. Burkina Faso saw a mobile internet shutdown in November over protests by citizens who wanted an end to French military intervention in the regional war against Islamist militants. Soon after entering the new year in 2022, Burkina Faso faced another nation-wide mobile internet shutdown citing national security reasons. The government continued to block Facebook even after mobile internet was restored. In Somaliland, a self declared Republic of Somalia, authorities cut off internet access for 10 hours in August 2022, as a response to citizen protests following the

postponement of Presidential elections. Previously, in 2017, authorities had denied access to the internet during an election. (Wilkins, 2021)

Similarly, in 2018, authorities in Sierra Leone disrupted the internet during elections to interrupt flow of information on election results. In August 2022, anti- government protests in Sierra Leone over the rising cost of living turned violent leading to the death of several individuals, including police. For two hours a nation-wide internet shutdown was imposed. The government owned optical fibre cable infrastructure company, Zoodlabs issued a public statement that the outage was due to emergency maintenance. This seemed like an unlikely co-incidence for internet observers and human right watchdogs (Access Now, 2022). Authorities in Zimbabwe too have had a history of interfering with internet networks during elections. They have also repeatedly used shutdown as a tactic to quash protests, at least since 2019 (Al Jazeera, 2019a).

According to several Human Rights groups and think tanks, India has been found to be a repeat offender of human rights over the last several years by imposing internet shutdowns and restricting the right to free speech, association, and assembly (Rosson, Anthonio, & Tackett, 2023; InternetShutdowns.in, n.d; Woodhams & Migliano, 2021). Authorities in the country have time and again cut off internet access to citizens during demonstrations of protest. Apart from protest-related shutdowns, authorities have also ordered preventive blackouts during significant national holidays, as a precautionary measure against riots and violence, in situations and places under conflict. Since 2005, Jammu and Kashmir has experienced internet blackouts on 15th August, India's Independence Day, as part of a routine security measure (Jalan, 2018; Masoodi, 2020). Localised shutdowns have also occurred during government examinations to prevent cheating and leaking of question papers in Rajasthan, Assam, and Haryana (Sanzgiri, 2023; NDTV News Desk, 2024). In 2022, India remained the country with the highest number of recorded shutdowns in the world —

for the fifth consecutive year (Rosson, Anthonio & Tackett, 2023). Two cases take a special mention here, both for the severity and the long duration of the shutdowns- Jammu and Kashmir, and Manipur.

3.1 Jammu and Kashmir

In the past, the Indian government had issued one of the longest shutdowns in the state of Jammu and Kashmir after revoking Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, and converting the state into a union territory. The revocation of this article meant that the special status of the state, which allowed for the state to have its own constitution, and limited the power of the centre over Jammu and Kashmir to defence, foreign affairs, and communications, and the prominence of the State Constituent Assembly, would be dissolved. The abrogation of Article 370 along with the conversion of J&K into a union territory essentially brought the state under the direct administration of the centre. Anticipating furore over the sudden abrogation, the Indian government placed Jammu and Kashmir under a perpetual and punitive shutdown beginning August 2019. The state saw the restoration of 2G services only in January 2020, but even that connection was not meaningful. Internet access was limited to whitelisted websites, and access to social media websites was restricted (NDTV, 2020). Even so, the Inspector General of Police for Kashmir on occasion suspended not only 2G services, but also voice calling and SMS services additionally (Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, 2020, p.13). It is not uncommon for the territory to witness shutdowns, however. The erstwhile-state of Jammu and Kashmir until then experienced periodic internet shutdowns along with curfews on a regular basis, given its volatile geographic and political position. This can be observed on occasions such as India's independence day (15th August), Pakistan's independence day (14th August), and the Republic day of India (26th January). However,

it was the first time that such a prolonged shutdown and throttling took place that lasted for 18 months before 3G and 4G mobile services were restored.

3.2 Manipur

It is imperative to mention Manipur in India for its ongoing communication blackout, since early 2023. On May 3rd, 2023 internet was turned off in Manipur following a conflict between two communities in the states– the Meiteis and the Kukis. This has since turned into an ongoing civil strife, with periodic reports of violence. The governor of Manipur issued an order on May 3rd, 2023, banning the internet for 5 days. According to the order, it was given as a response to the All Tribal Student's Union Manipur (ATSUM) rally with a total shutdown in all the hill districts on 3rd May, which was conducted in protest against the demand for inclusion of Meiteis in the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category. The order says, "During this rally and total shutdown there are reports on incidents like fighting amongst volunteers/youths of different communities and situation is tense and volatile in the districts of Bishnupur and Churachandpur". The order was passed under the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency and Public Safety) Rules, 2017, which cited that the situation is likely to cause serious disturbances to the peaceful co-existence of the communities and maintenance of public order. Therefore, the order to curb/suspend mobile data services for 5 days. Although the order stated only a mobile internet ban, broadband networks were also reported to be affected, from citizen reports/ experiences. (Manzar, Sulfat, & Barman, 2023)

From May 3rd to December 3rd, 2023 the government of Manipur imposed 44 state-wide shutdown orders which affected 3.2 million residents for 212 days in that year (Rosson, Anthonio, & Tackett, 2024, p.32). Of these shutdowns, residents spent two and a half months under a total shutdown of both broadband and mobile internet services. The sexual assault and violence against 2 Kuki-

women shocked the country when a video of the incident surfaced on the internet two months after the assault taking place. The incident took place on 4th May, at the height of the violence, and the ongoing shutdown at the time prevented the news from reaching government officials and mainstream media outside Manipur. Amidst this turmoil the Chief Minister of Manipur, N. Biren Singh resigned on 13th February, 2025 which brought the state under the President's Rule, which has been the state of law and order since (Times of India, 2025).

3.3 The Case: Anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests

The anti Citizenship Amendment Act protests started as a response to the legislation, by the same name, passed by the Indian Parliament on 11th December, 2019. This legislation allowed for persecuted minorities of Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian religions from neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to seek refuge and get fast-tracked citizenship in India. It is important to understand this amendment along with the National Register of Citizens (or NRC). The purpose of NRC is to document all legal citizens so that all illegal immigrants can be identified and deported. This activity of NRC was undertaken in the Indian state of Assam, situated in the north eastern region of the country. The state has a highly permeable border through which immigrants are known to enter illegally and sometimes stay in the country. In Assam, the exercise of NRC was complete in August of 2019, however, when the CAA was passed in December of the same year, riots erupted across the state and neighbouring states of the north eastern region. There are two different reasons for protests that took over the country- one is Assam's and the other is the rest of India's. The fear of drastically outnumbering Assamese speakers in the state by immigrant Bengali speaking Hindus is the big one (Deka, 2019). In the rest of the country, the primary concern is that the NRC may leave out citizens based on poor documentation, and the CAA would in turn grant non-muslim citizens easier recourse, effectively making it harder

for muslim citizens who may have missing or mistaken documents to find solutions (Changoiwala, 2024). It is therefore widely criticised as being discriminatory on the basis of religion. It is the implementation of CAA along with NRC that is being seen as unconstitutional by the protestors.

The protests started even before the bill was passed in December 2019, and went on for four months, well into 2020 until late March when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the country. Starting in Assam and states in the north-east, protests quickly spread over to the rest of the country. Protests emerged from public universities by students and student bodies, in Jamia Millia Islamia, and Aligarh Muslim University, students were brutally attacked by the police. More than 27 people were killed during this time. Following these protests, in February of 2020, riots broke out in north-east Delhi, a Muslim dominated neighbourhood. (PTI, 2019)

3.3.1 Newspaper Analysis: Documenting Internet Shutdowns Through News Reports

In order to study these protests, I turn towards newspaper articles that report on the events of shutdowns and mobilisation. There are some shortcomings in studying newspaper reports on shutdowns, however. As of 2020, the government was not mandated to release shutdown orders, so much of the reporting does not specify against which orders were shutdowns imposed. This is a significant drawback given that the legality of such orders cannot be verified or questioned in most cases. My attempt at examining newspaper articles is to offer a proxy view of the timeline of events and shutdowns that occurred at the time. Some of the things that can be observed through these reports are: for how long shutdowns have been ordered, who are the officials who have ordered or commented upon it, and what their comments were. There are 13 newspaper articles that I have selected, from two major English dailies- The Indian Express and The Hindu. These two

publications were selected for their national reach, and their long-standing reputation of credible reportage on issues concerning citizens and their rights. Newspaper articles were purposively selected from these two dailies based on their explicit coverage of internet shutdowns during the anti-CAA protests. Articles reporting generally on the protest were omitted to focus on instances of shutdown. The protests lasted till March 2020, until the Covid-19 lockdown was announced in the country. However, in December 2019 the maximum cases of shutdowns were reported in the media. The report findings are presented chronologically to help trace the protest occurrences alongside shutdown reactions by authorities. These data points help map the patterns of shutdowns, and see how they differ in place and duration. The reports also throw light on the inconsistencies of legal directives issued by the government officials.

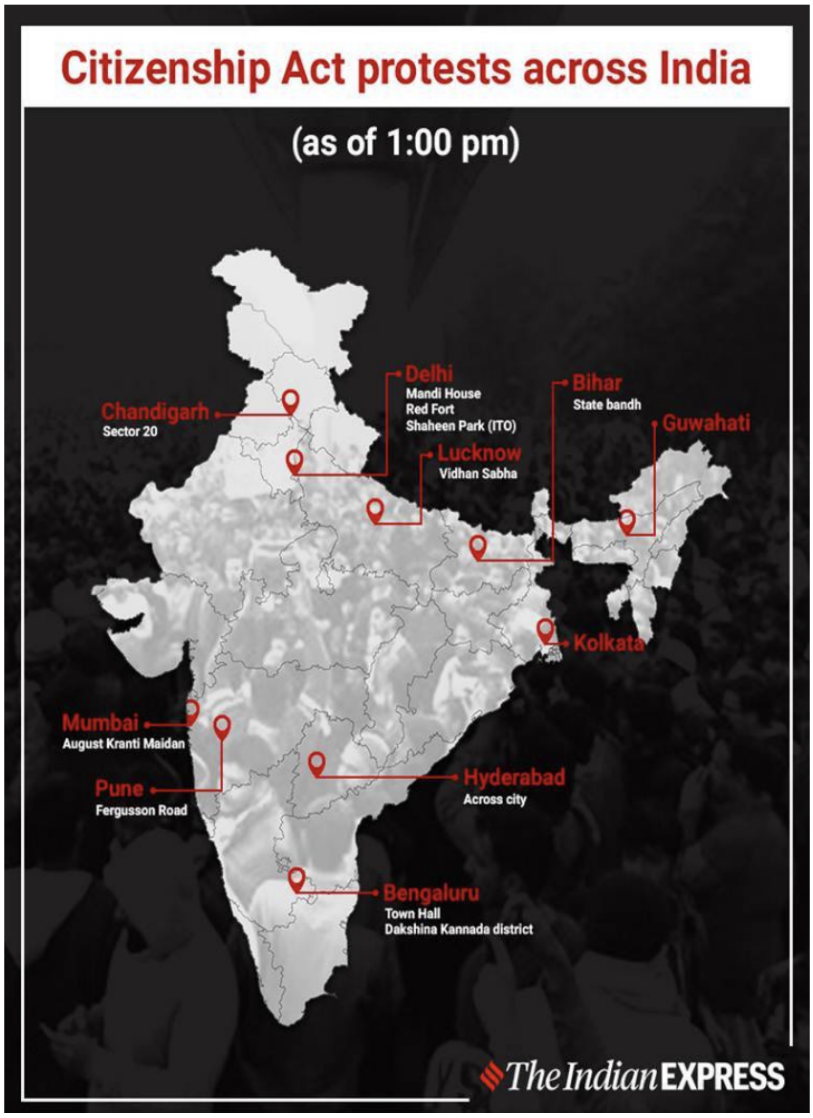


Figure 3.1: A map of the anti-CAA protests across India from the Indian Express published on 19th December, 2019.[14]

3.3.2 Findings: Deconstructing the Chronology of Shutdowns

DECEMBER 10th

The earliest report of a network disruption that appeared in The Indian Express was on 10th December, 2019. It reports that the government of Tripura imposed a shutdown of SMS and mobile internet services for 48 hours. An 11- hour bandh called by the North East Students' Organisation (NESO), which is an umbrella body of influential students' bodies of the region, was in place where huge processions raised slogans against the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, vehicles were torched, and clashes between the protestors and agitators ensued.

This was done in the wake of two simultaneous protests by the Twipra Students Federation (TSF) and Joint Movement Against CAB (a platform of three indigenous political parties and tribal social organisations) which virtually crippled public movement. (Agarwala & Deb, 2019)

DECEMBER 11th

On December 11th, The Hindu reported that authorities in Assam followed Tripura in suspending mobile internet. It reports that, "Mobile Internet and data services were also suspended for 24 hours in 10 districts of the (Assam's Brahmaputra) Valley, including Kamrup (Metro), Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Lakhimpur and Jorhat." (The Hindu, 2019a) The report cites Additional Chief Secretary (Home and Political) Kumar Sanjay Krishna, to have issued an order suspending mobile internet

[14] The Indian Express. (2019b, December 19). Citizenship Act: From Delhi to Bengaluru, protests rage across India; top 10 developments. *The Indian Express*. https://indianexpress.com/article/india/citizenship-amendment-act-protests-delhi-bengaluru-ramachandra-guha-yogendra-yadav-detained-6174514/

service because of “probabilities” of such protests “intensifying” and following reports that the “protestors are involved in vandalism”. (The Hindu, 2019a)

DECEMBER 19th

Protests which erupted in the states of the north-east early December, gained momentum in the rest of the country more gradually. On December 19th, The Indian Express reported that mobile internet connectivity was shut down in parts of the national capital, New Delhi. The news article goes on to refer to reports by telecom operators like Vodafone and Bharti Airtel. The article says, “Telecom operator Bharti Airtel has said it has “suspended voice, internet and SMS services” in some parts of Delhi on the instruction from the government.”. (The India Express, 2019b)

In the same report we also see that several entries and exits to metro stations have been sealed, “Earlier in the morning, the DMRC had closed gates of seven stations, including Jamia Millia, Jama Masjid and Munirka. Seven more stations were closed soon after, followed by two more. Metro stations which are closed include Patel Chowk, Lok Kalyan Marg, Udyog Bhawan, ITO, Pragati Maidan, Janpath, Rajiv Chowk, Mandi House, and Khan Market”. Not only were communication channels shut down but also movement of people was curtailed during the peak of the protests. (The Indian Express, 2019b)

DECEMBER 20th

The Indian Express, reports that it was the first time in New Delhi, the national capital, to have experienced a communication blackout on 19th December, 2019. Mobile internet, voice and SMS services were cut off in several parts of Delhi against the backdrop of the protests. Mobile services were also shut for a day in Ghaziabad, UP, neighbouring Delhi. The shutdowns were executed after a letter was sent to the “nodal officers” of “Airtel, Vodafone-Idea, Jio, MTNL/BSNL” by the Deputy Commissioner of Police (Special Cell) P S Khushwa. According to the report, the letter

said, “In view of the prevailing law and order situation, it is hereby directed that communication of all types, that is, voice, SMS and internet, be halted from 9 am to 1 pm (on Thursday) in the Cell IDs/BTS covering the following areas: Walled city areas of north and central districts, Mandi House, Seelampur, Jaffrabad, Mustafabad, Jamia Nagar, Shaheen Bagh and Bawana.” The letter also stated that the orders should be treated “as an absolute direction and compliance should be reported”. (Mehrotra, 2019)

The letter went on to state the reason for this shutdown: “There is a possibility that anti-social elements can misuse internet services and create rumours that can lead to law and order problems since there have been violent protests against CAA. Keeping this in mind, the administration will be shutting down all mobile services between 10 pm on Thursday to 10 pm Friday.” (Mehrotra, 2019)

Vodafone responded on Twitter clarifying doubts from protestors, as well as local citizens, that indeed they had cut off internet access as per the directive received from the government. Bharti Airtel’s chairman Sunil Mittal was quoted by PTI saying “There is a government order and we are just following it.” The Indian Express contacted sources in Reliance Jio who also confirmed that it was standard instruction given to all telecom companies, and they had to comply with it. (Mehrotra, 2019)

However, some tweets which responded to queries on the shutdown by the official Vodafone and Airtel customer care handle seem to have been deleted in many cases. (The India Express, 2019d) Some of the screenshots of the deleted tweets have been archived by The Indian Express.

The Hindu, on 20th December reported, “mobile internet and text messaging services of all telecom operators remained suspended in Lucknow and some other parts of Uttar Pradesh…” The suspension announced on Thursday, 19th was issued by Additional Chief Secretary Awanish Kumar Awasthi, to suspend services till Saturday noon. Section 144 CrPC was already in place in the entire

state when internet services were suspended in Sambhal, Aligarh, Mau, Ghaziabad, Azamgarh and Bareilly districts. (The Hindu, 2019b)

In Ghaziabad, Jio users received a message that read, “As per the government instructions, the internet services have been temporarily stopped in your area because of which you are not able to use these services. You will be able to use the internet service once we get directions from the government.” (The Hindu, 2019b)

While the national capital faced its first internet blackout, on the same day Assam was just coming out of a 9-day blackout on Friday, 20th December, 2019. Internet services were shut down on 11th December, which was restored only on 20th December. The Indian Express reports, “The development comes a day after the Gauhati High Court rapped the state government over the prolonged shutdown and asked for it to be restored by 5 pm that day.” (The India Express, 2019c)

On December 20th, The Indian Express reported about how protestors have found alternative ways to communicate using the “Bridgefy” app under circumstances of internet shutdowns. According to the report, Airtel and Vodafone “appeared to confirm that voice, internet, and SMS services were suspended” on Thursday, 19th December. Bridgefy was reported to be used by protestors in Hong Kong, China earlier in 2019. This app does not require data to function and relies on bluetooth technology to send messages to each other. The app “…essentially uses a mesh broadcasting network to send messages to people. There is the option of one-on-one private chatting between two users within the range of 100 metres or 330 feet. For this, Bridgefy uses a mesh network hop method where messages simply hop from one person’s phone to another till it reaches the intended person.” (The Indian Express, 2019a)

What stands out about this app is that it “lets users broadcast a message to multiple users in range at once even if they are not on their contact list. Using the Bridgefy app, one can send offline ads,

sounds, game moves as well as locations." The report uses tweets by protestors who shared the new application's benefits and urged others to get on the app, which would be useful under internet blackouts. (The Indian Express, 2019a)

DECEMBER 21st

The Indian Express did an in-depth news report on the 9-days of blackout that Assam faced from 11th to 20th December. Internet was only restored after the Gauhati High Court issued an order revoking the blackout. This order came after 4 public interest litigations that were filed by journalist Ajit Kumar Bhuyan, and advocates Bonoshri Gogoi, Randeep Sharma and Debakanta Doley in the High Court. Swati Bidhan Baruah, who represented one of the petitioners in the case, said that the ban was aimed at curbing the initial violent incidents, but that the government kept extending it meaninglessly even after the shift of situation to a better state of affairs.

The interviews show that many app-based livelihoods like cab services, and food delivery were severely affected. They found that cab drivers had faced major losses due to lack of connectivity. Several protests were organised by the All Assam Cab Operators' Union, the president Ismail Ali said that "…ours is an internet-centric business…There are at least 12,000 cabs in Guwahati that depend on the internet to function, whether it is Ola or Uber. We carried out many protests about how we should be compensated, but the government paid no heed." (Agarwala, 2019)

On 20th December, with mobile internet restored, app-based services swung into action soon after. Many residents took to social media to express their displeasure, saying that the internet is a medium of livelihood for a lot of people and not just about spreading propaganda. Students and teachers faced the shutdowns in the middle of their examinations which got postponed eventually. They couldn't access academic journals or get news about what was going on elsewhere in the

country regarding the protests. A college student was quoted as saying that their entire generation is 'digital'- the internet and social media is that platform that has a wide reach has been curtailed.

Banking was also affected, which led many customers to make anxious calls and to visit the bank because net banking was down. Broadband services resumed on 17th December, while mobile internet was back only after 3 days. Kumar Sanjay Krishna, the Additional Chief Secretary to Assam government's Home and Political Department said, "These decisions are based on inputs given by intelligence agencies. If we get a report saying that there is likelihood of a problem then we have no alternative but to take a decision in favour of extending the ban". (Agarwala, 2019)

A petition seeking to review the court's order on the restoration of the internet filed by the Assam government was dismissed on 20th December by the Gauhati High Court. The review was sought after the authorities received information about huge gatherings (estimated at 30,000) in places like Makum and Dhemaji (in Upper Assam). Krishna said, "…Large numbers would be travelling at night, intelligence reports suggested that it was better not to revoke the ban in the evening (at 5pm on December 20th)." However, Krishna said that if any violent incident were to happen again in the future, the ban would be brought back. The police also requested citizens to use social media with caution while posting or sharing unverified/provocative information (Agarwala, 2019).

At the same time in several districts of Lucknow, protests against CAA turned extremely violent killing at least 6 persons. The report said that at least 38 policemen were injured in the violence, of which 6 suffered bullet injuries. Senior police officers said that it was the protesters who opened fire at the police in many protest sites, and set 25 vehicles on fire. Over 660 people from across towns were taken into custody as a part of "preventive action". The newspaper reports that "Officials said that internet services have been blocked in several districts, including Bulandshahr, Sambhal, Lucknow, Kanpur, Bijnor, Firozabad and Muzaffarnagar" (The India Express, 2019e).

DECEMBER 22nd

Violence erupted across Uttar Pradesh, in the third week of December. The total number of deaths in 3 days of protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act reached 15, including a minor. An Indian Express report on 22nd December reported that the “Internet had been suspended in several major cities of the state, including Lucknow…In the western district of Kasganj, Internet services were suspended following tension, but police described the situation as under control” (The India Express, 2019f).

In Amroha district, a rumour had spread of a scuffle between residents and police over CAA protests in the Vasavangunj area, near Amroha’s Jama Masjid. According to a resident, the rumour led many locals from different parts to gather at Court Chauraha after Friday namaz. “In order to control the crowd, police did lathicharge, and there was stone pelting by a few miscreants in response”, the resident said. The report further informs that, the “Additional SP Ajay Pratap said they have put up screenshots across Amroha of video footage to help identify the miscreants. While the situation is now peaceful, prohibitory orders continue to be in place, including an Internet shutdown, while forces have been deployed around all the mosques”. (The India Express, 2019f)

DECEMBER 24th

The Hindu on 24th December reports that internet shutdown in Lucknow which began on 19th December, was extended till 24th midnight. District Magistrate Abhishek Prakash said the shutdown was being extended for another two days. A senior government official said that this extension was done for the purpose of the Prime Minister's visit to the city for the unveiling of Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s statue at the Lok Bhawan. The report also shows that locals faced many problems with the shutdown in place, which did not allow them to use e-commerce websites for booking

tickets, and sending gifts during the Christmas season. Food delivery and cab service apps were also severely hit. (The Hindu, 2019c)

DECEMBER 26th

In Ghaziabad, an order by the District Magistrate Ajay Shankar Pandey imposed section 144 CrPC along with internet suspension for 24 hours. The Indian Express on 26th December reported that the DM said the step had been taken to prevent hate-mongering on social media. “The anti-social elements won't be able to take advantage of the Internet to spread hatred and disturb communal harmony," he said. This was the second time that month that the Ghaziabad administration suspended internet services. (Bhatnagar, 2019)

“Keeping in mind the law and order situation, Ghaziabad administration has ordered the shutting of internet services between 10 pm Thursday and 10 pm Friday,” the order issued by the DM said. The statement further read that “No cellular company would be given relaxation and if found flouting the order, proceedings will be initiated under section 188 (disobeying public servant order) of the IPC”. (Bhatnagar, 2019)

3.3.3 Analysis: Interpreting Patterns and Themes

A brief look at the reports above offers insights into the stance that the government takes towards internet service providers (ISPs). Section 188 of the IPC that refers to the disobedience to order served by a public servant, is being used by government officials to force ISPs to abide by the shutdown orders. It is also interesting to note that most tweets by telecom companies announcing the shutdowns or clarifying citizen inquiry were retracted by them soon after. (The Indian Express, 2019d)

As per their licence agreement, ISPs must mandatorily follow government orders to shut down services. The Unified Licence Agreement states explicitly that government has "...the right to take over the service, equipment and networks of the Licensee (either in part or in whole of the service area) in case any directions are issued in the public interest by the Government of India in the event of a National emergency/war or low intensity conflict or any other eventuality" (Kovacs & Ranganathan, 2017).

Conflicts such as those in Kashmir and the north-east are of the low intensity variety. In addition, ISP licence agreements note explicitly that the government reserves the right to keep any area out of the operation zone of the service if implications of security so require (Kovacs & Ranganathan, 2017).

Talking to Al Jazeera about the agency service providers have during shutdowns , David Kaye, UN Special Rapporteur (2014-2020) said,

> They don't have a lot of opportunity to resist government restrictions, so if the government says to shut down the internet in a place, it's hard for them to say no ... These companies lose money during internet shutdowns. Putting aside the freedom of expression, shutdowns cause harm to companies. So, it would suit them to be exercising whatever economic leverage they might have to push back these restrictions. They don't have a whole lot of flexibility in responding, so it seems like these companies might be on the side of the government. (Essa, 2017)

In December 2019, at the height of the protest and shutdowns, Rajan Mathews, the director general of Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI) highlighted that the cost of shutdowns was estimated at 24.5 million rupees for every hour of internet shutdown (Phartiyal, 2019). The COAI, which represents telecom giants like Bharti Airtel, Reliance Jio, and Vodafone Idea (Vi) later

requested the Centre to urge state governments to reduce the suspension of internet services as it inconveniences citizens and cripples critical functions such as money transfers, and online education (Rathee, 2024). Moreover, the Association points to the fact that with the new legislation under Telecommunications (Temporary Suspension of Services) Rules, 2024, shutdowns may not exceed 15 days o, referring to the 23 day long shutdown in the north-east (Pandey, 2024).

Table 3.1: Nature of shutdowns during anti-CAA protests

Date	Place	Duration of shutdown	Nature of shutdown
10th Dec	Tripura	48 hours	SMS and mobile internet services
11th-20th Dec	Assam	9 days	Mobile internet services
11th Dec	Some parts of Assam	24 hours	Mobile internet services
19th Dec	Some parts of New Delhi	4 hours	Voice, internet and SMS services
19th/20th Dec	Lucknow, Bareilly, Mau, Sambhal, Aligarh, Azamgarh	48 hours	SMS and mobile internet services
19th Dec	Ghaziabad	24 hours	Mobile internet services
21st Dec	Bulandshahr, Sambhal, Lucknow, Kanpur, Bijnor, Firozabad and Muzaffarnagar	Unknown	Mobile internet services

22nd Dec	Major cities of UP including Lucknow, Kasganj	Unknown	Mobile internet services
24th Dec	Lucknow- (19th) Extended till 24th midnight	5 days	Mobile internet services
26th Dec	Ghaziabad	24 hours	Mobile internet services

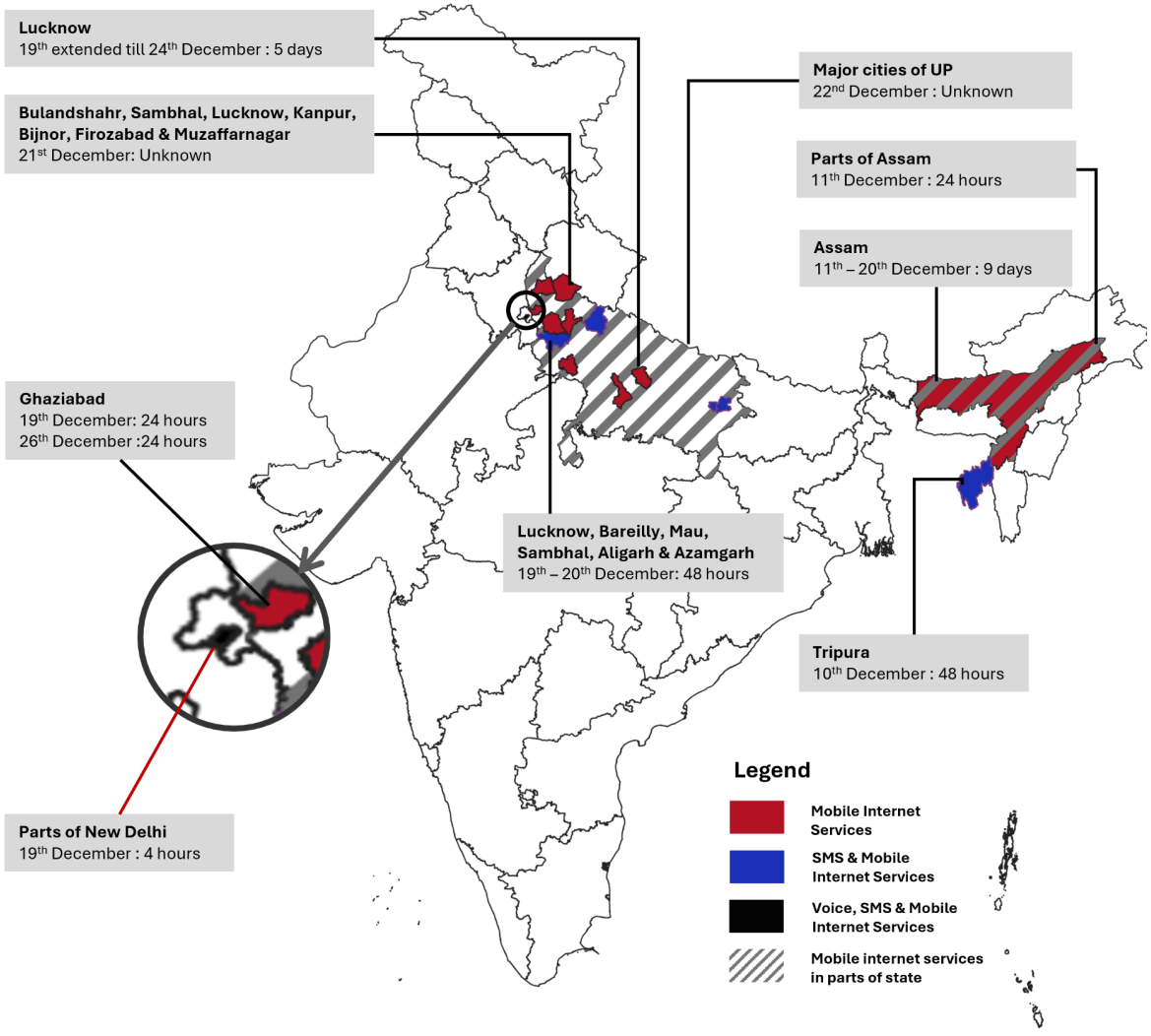


Figure 3.2 Map showing the areas affected by shutdowns from Table 3.1.

From Table 3.1which summarises the nature and duration of shutdowns drawn from newspaper samples, a few observations can be made. Mobile internet services are the most frequent type or degree of shutdown ordered by administrators. It is observed here and in other studies (Kathuria, et al., 2018) that mobile networks and data services are impacted disproportionately more than fixed-line connections because they are more widely accessible. Therefore, the assumption that the potential for damage is higher. Only in severe cases, that may be recollected from Manipur and Kashmir, that fixed-line networks were also affected. A report (ICUBE, 2023) by industry body, Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and market data analytics firm, Kantar, shows that, the "Usage of mobile phone for accessing internet stays universal". This means that all those (100%) who comprise Active Internet Users (AIU) in India have been accessing the internet on their mobile phones. This remains at 100% for both urban and rural areas. PC users measured for 17% and 13% in urban and rural areas respectively. Internet usage on other devices such as tablets, streaming devices, smart speakers, smart TV, etc., was at 18% and 9% in urban and rural areas respectively. Moreover, the same report notes that 85% of all AIUs used the internet for entertainment, 77% used it for communication, and 70% used it to access social media. A steep spike of 14% was observed in using the internet for e-commerce, making it 52% of all AIUs. Internet adoption is also reported to be increasing rapidly in rural areas in comparison to urban areas. One observation that may be surmised from this is that shutting mobile networks is the first and the most ubiquitously used mode of control.

This regular disconnection, however, adversely impacts service providers which operate in areas that are a frequent target of shutdowns. Taking the case of Kashmir specifically, a report studying the economic impact of shutdowns finds that,

> The average data consumption falls by 30-40% in case of shutdowns, thus impacting revenues of telcos and the consumer's ability to use the quantum of data purchased. For the

> consumer there is considerable wastage as they buy plans based on their requirements, but aren't able to use all of it if a shutdown is ordered. Subscriber behaviour in Kashmir is different. In absence of other sources of entertainment or social engagement, data consumption is much higher than in other metropolitan cities. Hence, there is also scope for higher revenue, but due to shutdowns, these revenues are not being realised fully. (Kathuria, et al., 2018)

On 19th December, between 9 am and 1 pm, all communication channels were shut down, including voice calls, and SMS in several parts of Delhi. This was set apart from regular shutdown orders that are primarily targeted at mobile internet only by authorities. Although this occurred only for 4 hours, the reportage around the city-wide shutdown was notable. This could be a result of the concentrated number of users in the city, which resulted in more inconvenience being vocalised and acknowledged in the media.

Another observation that can be made from the table above is that the longer shutdowns have happened in states and areas that are away from metropolitan and capital cities. In Delhi, for instance, the shutdown was in place only for 4 hours as opposed to some areas in Assam and Uttar Pradesh, that cut off the internet for several days on end.

In many cases, it has been observed that internet shutdowns were placed in tandem with section 144 of the CrPC which is telling of how movement of people and movement of information are interconnected. The section is issued by the District Magistrate in urgent cases of security threat or riot and bars the assembly of five or more people in an area where it has been imposed. Up until the case of Anuradha Bhasin vs Union of India, section 144 Cr.P.C empowered authorities to implement shutdowns under the same order. However, this case has now challenged this broad interpretation to include shutdowns under its ambit. In Delhi, DMRC closed several metro stations curtailing the movement of people, and thereby their ability to congregate, share ideas, and to disallow protest

demonstrations. Internet shutdowns being implemented under Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services Rules, 2017, can be seen as an online counterpart of section 144 CrPC- that disallows large networks to communicate and share space online.

The cases that this chapter refers to take place in 2020, before both the judgement of Anuradha Bhasin and the Telecommunications (Temporary Suspension of Services) Rules, 2024 would come into place. Keeping that in mind, I evaluate the legal basis on which these suspensions took place. The Table 3.2 below is built by scraping through the newspapers to find any mention of the orders against which shutdowns were imposed. Secondly, the government officials who were quoted by those articles give us a clue towards the provisions for suspensions in cases where orders were not mentioned.

Table 3.2: Legal basis of shutdowns during anti-CAA protests.

Date	Place	State authority quoted in report	Law under which shutdowns were
10th Dec	Tripura	No information provided	Section 144 CrPC
11th-20th Dec	Assam	Additional Chief Secretary (Home and Political) Kumar Sanjay Krishna	Section 144 CrPC, Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services, 2017
11th Dec	Some parts of Assam	Additional Chief Secretary (Home and Political) Kumar Sanjay Krishna	Section 144 CrPC, Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services, 2017

19th Dec	Some parts of New Delhi	Deputy Commissioner of Police (Special Cell) P S Khushwa	No information provided
19th/20th Dec	Lucknow, Bareilly, Mau, Sambhal, Aligarh, Azamgarh	Additional Chief Secretary Awanish Kumar Awasthi	Section 144 CrPC
19th Dec	Ghaziabad	No information provided	No information provided
21st Dec	Bulandshahr, Sambhal, Lucknow, Kanpur, Bijnor, Firozabad and Muzaffarnagar	No information provided	No information provided
22nd Dec	Major cities of UP including Lucknow, Kasganj	No information provided	No information provided
24th Dec	Lucknow- (19th) Extended till 24th midnight	District Magistrate Abhishek Prakash	Section 144 CrPC
26th Dec	Ghaziabad	District Magistrate Ajay Shankar Pandey	Section 144 CrPC

Table 3.2 shows the list of authorities who were quoted in the newspaper reports, along with the laws against which they were implemented. Many of the news reports do not mention any quotes from authorities. The red coloured cells indicate the possible laws against which orders were imposed. I make the inferences based on the authorities quoted. For example, the additional chief

secretary only has the power to invoke the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services, 2017 to order an internet shutdown. Similarly, the district magistrate (DM) only has the authority to impose section 144 of CrPC. One report coming from Ghaziabad by the Indian Express (Bhatnagar, 2019), includes the official order in the form of a screenshot, signed by the District Magistrate Ajay Shankar Pandey invoking Section 144 of CrPC. A report by The Hindu (2019b) on Lucknow, Bareilly, Mau, Sambal, Aligargh, and Azamgargh mentions both the authority and the orders against which shutdowns were imposed. In this same article however, Additional Chief Secretary Awanish Kumar Awasthi, while mentioned in this report alongside Section 144 CrPC, could not have officially imposed the shutdown against this law. While curfew and internet shutdown may be imposed in these districts, it would have been at the behest of the District Magistrate's orders. This inconsistency in reportage could be a result of orders not being mandated to be publicly released at the time of the anti-CAA protests. Therefore, solely based on reportage, there is no clarity on the legal basis for the shutdowns.

3.4 Conclusion

The newspaper reports included in this analysis offer insights into the mechanisms and legal instruments applied to enforce shutdowns, also pointing to the fact that place and location play a very important part in the way that people react to communication disruption (as evidenced in the reportage). Shutdowns in urban centres prompt bigger responses and outrage as compared to sub urban centres. Shutdowns are also challenged mainly by civil society members like journalists and student unions. There is a direct relation between the flow of information and flow of people as seen in the way movement was curtained by blocking public transportation and curfew was imposed. Grover (2023) specifically studies the implications of internet shutdowns on citizenship in India. He finds that the exercise of digital citizenship– through Aadhar, is also compromised under shutdowns

by emphasizing how restricted access limits individuals' participation in public life and governance. Therefore, a lack of information and connectivity impacts more than just curtailing the ability of citizens to congregate, but directly impacts their daily life. It also effectively shuts down businesses that are enabled by an online ecosystem. Therefore it is necessary to look at shutdowns not just as a control mechanism but also as a disruptive force that cuts off sections of the population to essential services.

The study of newspaper articles thus allows us to map out the different reactions that people, civil society, and internet service providers had to the shutdowns. These articles expose the way in which shutdowns have been imposed by authorities and shows that information control is synonymous with citizen control.

Chapter 4

Reclaiming rights and contesting narratives: Farmers' protest

On the 6th of November 2021, my friend and I embarked on the journey from Hauz Khas in New Delhi to Singhu, the border where farmers from Uttar Pradesh and Haryana had stationed their campsite protesting the three farm laws passed in 2020. We took the metro station towards Jahangirpuri, which lasted 55 minutes and cost 40 INR. From here we took bus no. 193, from the Jahangirpuri metro station bus stop to the Singhu border. I discovered that women could ride for free in the DTC buses, but we were given a pink ticket nevertheless. The fare otherwise was 15 INR. To our surprise, the bus halted about 2.5 km away from the actual stop. Upon asking, the conductor assured us that the protest site lay ahead and the buses would be taking a diversion from here on because of the blocked highway. It was unusually hot for November in Delhi, and quite dusty, as is normal. Along with us was another woman visibly perturbed about being left half way from our destination. Taking cues from each other, we hired a share auto that took us ahead. After covering a short distance, the autorickshaw driver refused to go any further than the police barricade that was set up across the highway. We could see a huge tent in camouflage green erected beyond this barricade, manned by two police officers on either side of the lanes that emerged from the blockade. At the mouth of this tent, there led a smaller road to the right which was jam packed with vehicles coming from Haryana. The tent was placed such that we could not see the highway beyond. We walked up to the policemen anticipating hostility. However, when I explained to them that I had come for research, they responded calmly.

One of them said they were not allowing anybody to pass and that I would need a police permit to enter the protest area. We walked towards the traffic that was emerging from the smaller lane next to the barricade. We decided to take our chance of walking all the way to the protest site.

We walked through a lane that went right from the national highway which was choc-a-block with vehicles, both trying to go in and out of Delhi NCR. The narrow lane gave way to a wider road, opening up the space for vehicles to move faster and clear traffic. The walk easily lasted 40 minutes. There were small shops and houses dotting the road, alongside patches of green farmlands. From a distance, we could see tarpaulin and metal sheds to the right. We knew we were getting closer to the protest site. We took a shortcut, and followed the line of tents, trying to get closer. We finally reached the site that was bang in the middle of the highway. It gave no signs of being in the way of something, but rather seemed like it was always there. From where we entered there were horses, and their food and water kept to one side. We saw a man guarding the entrance to the campsite; however, we were not stopped or questioned. Inside the protest campsite, we saw one tent dedicated for a library and another occupied by a few men who were debating intensely. Up ahead was a small stall selling badges and flags with graphics supporting the farmers. The path led us to the stage area, where we saw about 10-12 people dispersing from the stage. On enquiry, we learned that the protestors meet between 3pm to 4pm every day to catch up on updates from other protest sites, the progress of the talks between the government and the unions, and the next steps they need to take. The people were scattered and few.

4.1. Introduction

Citizen protests have historically played a crucial role in shaping policy by bringing attention to pressing issues and exerting pressure on policymakers. For instance, following the Fukushima

Daiichi nuclear disaster, in March 2011, Japan witnessed widespread protests from anti-nuclear groups, women's groups, and citizens who called for the government to abandon nuclear energy. While short-lived, the protests led to a dramatic change in the country's energy policy, aiming to become nuclear-free, until former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was re-elected in 2012 (Williams, 2012). In 1986, in the Philippines, the People Power Revolution (also known as the EDSA revolution) was a nonviolent civil resistance by the citizens, including students, and religious groups, against President Ferdinand Marcos' regime of violence and electoral fraud. In four days, Marcos was ousted to make way for democratic reforms (McGeown, 2011). The often-cited Civil Rights Movement, in the US, in the 20th century, also used various forms of civil disobedience to bring attention to legalised racial segregation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement of African Americans. This movement not only led to the striking down of the laws that allowed legal discrimination, but also achieved the passage of significant federal legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 (Library of Congress, n.d.). It is important to note that each of these movements faced coercive responses from the state in each instance, including police crackdowns and military interventions as well as ideological control through censorship of critical media outlets, restricted access to information, and limiting media coverage.

In India too, there have been several protest movements that have contributed to changing the course of national governance and policy. In 2011, the anti-corruption movement took off under the leadership of activist Anna Hazare and several political figures to alleviate corruption and kleptocracy in the country. The movement led to the passing of the Lokpal and Lokayukta Bill in 2013, making it an act that:

> Seeks to provide for the establishment of the institution of Lokpal to inquire into allegations of corruption against certain important public functionaries including the Prime Minister,

> cabinet ministers, members of parliament, Group A officials of the Central Government and for matters connecting them. (IANS, 2013)

Similarly, in 2012, the incident of a gang rape and fatal assault of a woman in Delhi sparked widespread outrage, leading to massive protests demanding stronger laws and measures to address gender-based violence and ensure the safety of women. The protests prompted the government to enact the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act (2013), which introduced harsher penalties for sexual offences, expanded the definition of rape, and enhanced provisions for the protection of women's rights ("President signs ordinance," 2013).

In this chapter, I look at a movement in the recent past that led to the change in government policy —the farmers' protest—which lasted from September 2020 to November 2021, and led to the repealing of the three controversial farm laws ("It's official. Three," 2021). The protestors, who were mainly farmers, held sit-in protests at the bordering villages of the national capital, Delhi at Singhu, Tikri, and Ghazipur, for over a year. This civic dissent by the farmers was interrupted by the state at various points, sometimes coercively, through the use of water cannons, tear gas, and barricades; and some other times by disrupting or suspending information infrastructure, through internet shutdowns and network throttling ("Protesting farmers brave," 2020).

The objective of this chapter is to look at how network disconnectivity is used as a controlling tactic by authorities to suppress dissent and information. In the following sections, I locate the trajectory of network disruptions in India and what factors make the shutdowns unique. I detail the case of the farmers' protest and the methodology that has been used in this study. In my findings, I explain how protestors and journalists overcame communicative restrictions; and examine how the meaning of collective action shifts with changing communicative regimes.

4.2. Literature Review

Restricting media and information through internet shutdowns has been a means to control movements in India for a long time (Rosson, Anthonio & Tackett, 2023). Access Now, an international organisation that defends and extends the digital rights of people and communities at risk, defines internet shutdowns as "an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information" (Olukotun & Micek, 2016). India has been repeatedly called out for human rights violations over the last several years through the imposition of internet shutdowns and restricting the right to free speech, association, and assembly (Rosson, Anthonio & Tackett, 2023; Kathuria et al., 2018; Woodhams & Migliano, 2021). In 2022, according to Rosson, Anthonio & Tackett (2023), India remained the country with the highest number of recorded shutdowns in the world—for the fifth consecutive year.

When a government order mandates for telecom companies to shut down access to the internet, it essentially disrupts networks built and sustained over the internet for a long period of time. Many reports (Kathuria et al., 2018; Taye, 2021) have found that the reasons cited by governing authorities for such blockades are to avoid cheating in examinations, to curb rumour-mongering on social media that eventually lead to public unrest, and sometimes to prevent violent protests. A report by Kathuria et al. (2018, pp. 30–31), for the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, reveals that "Administrators admitted the difficulty to keep order when provocative videos and photos were shared on social media. The justification of preemptive shutdowns was in anticipation of a law and order situation that could quickly go out of hand." Another report (Taye, 2021, p. 10) echoes the same findings: "some governments have attempted to justify shutdown orders by insisting they were to stop the spread of "fake news" or hate speech and incendiary or violence-inciting content." In the Northeastern state of Manipur, authorities justified

the shutdown by observing that “social media has become a useful tool for rumour-mongers and is being used extensively to incite the public” (Taye, 2021, p. 12), however, the report claims that there is little evidence to suggest that cutting off access has led to stopping violence in these areas.

Internet shutdowns have been categorised into two broad categories based on how much of the network is blocked. Governments have in the past used throttling, mobile and broadband internet service shutdown, or both tactics in combination (Taye, 2021). Throttling of a connection is to slow down the speed of the internet, either to specific sites, apps, or segments of traffic or to all of the internet, affecting both mobile and broadband connections. A complete shutdown, on the other hand, can cut access to mobile or fixed-line internet or completely block access to platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, or Telegram. It has been observed that several sectors get adversely impacted due to these shutdowns, like tourism, e-commerce, IT services, press and news media, education, healthcare, and digital payment gateways (Kathuria et al., 2018).

A report by industry body Internet and Mobile Association of India and market data analytics firm Kantar called *Internet in India Report 2022* shows that the “Usage of mobile phones for accessing the internet stays universal” (ICUBE, 2023, p. 24). This means that all users (100%) who comprise active internet users (AIU) in India have been accessing the internet on their mobile phones. This remains at 100% for both urban and rural areas. PC users measured 17% and 13% in urban and rural areas, respectively. Internet usage on other devices, such as tablets, streaming devices, smart speakers, smart TVs, etc., was at 18% and 9% in urban and rural areas, respectively. Moreover, the same report shows that 85% of all AIUs used the internet for entertainment, 77% used it for communication, and 70% used it to access social media. A steep spike of 14% was observed in using the internet for e-commerce since 2021, making it 52% of all AIUs. Internet adoption is also reported to be increasing rapidly in rural areas in comparison to urban areas.

As observed through the internet penetration data above, along with the usage of mobile devices, the effects of a network blackout have far-reaching consequences. A reason to shut mobile networks could arise from the fact that mobile phones are the most ubiquitously used device to connect to the internet. Kathuria et al. (2018, p. 36) observe that:

> Mobile networks were shut down more frequently than fixed lines. Administrators indicated that mobile networks were more impacted primarily because they are more widely accessible, and therefore potential for damage is higher. Only in very serious cases of agitation did administrators also shut down the fixed-line network.

This preference by the authorities to cut off mobile data networks increasingly endangers mobile phone users' online connectivity.

One can benefit from seeing the flip side of networked communities as well, by looking at those people and places that have not received telecommunication services. In India, it has been reported (Kemp, 2024) that about 683.7 million (or 47.6%) people are not connected to the internet. The digital divide in the country is immense, and several attempts are being made by the government to bridge this gap. Governments and civil societies have highlighted the benefits that citizens can avail through digitised governance and education. Thus, the internet is framed as not only desirable but also necessary in the country as many government schemes and public services are now digitally enabled, with the government pushing for a "Digital India" that presumes the widespread availability of internet access.

4.3. Methodology

More recently, it has become frequent for governments globally to clamp down on the internet during social unrest. Historically across the world, communication blackout is not a new tactic (Article 19, 2020; Tufekci, 2017). In late 2019 and early 2020, in India, due to the anti-Citizenship

Amendment Act protests, many shutdowns across multiple cities occurred simultaneously. This severe crackdown on the internet was criticised by many international watchdogs (Amnesty International Australia, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Later that year, we saw the farmers' protest, where a majority of farmers in the Northern part of India dissented from the newly introduced farm laws, through a sit-in protest near the national capital, Delhi. This is one case that can be studied suitably for examining digital disconnectivity as it was a highly targeted communication shutdown undertaken by the state to silence dissent.

To research an event-based phenomenon, it is useful to adapt Clarke's (2003) situational analyses approach to lay out the several actors and actants involved in the event and then find analytical and relational categories from the coded data. Clarke (2003) takes grounded theory literature and renovates, regenerates, and re-articulates it to lay emphasis on its postmodern capacities. Abandoning overarching paradigms and theoretical and methodological metasystems, the grounded theory approach allows for specific, local, heterogenous, and relational categories to emerge from the data itself. Situational analyses can be made by drawing three kinds of maps: First, situational maps, which lay out the major human, non-human, discursive, and other major elements in the research situation of concern and provoke analyses of relations among them. Second, the social worlds/arenas map, which engages in ongoing negotiations of the various collective actors involved, where meso-level interpretations can be made of its social organisational, institutional, and discursive dimensions. And, finally, the positional map lays out the major positions taken and not taken (silences) by actors. Using these maps to interpret data encourages making connections previously ignored or not seen, while also acknowledging disparities, contradictions, and gaps.

Table 4.1 Ordered situational map of shutdowns during Farmers' protest in India.

INDIVIDUAL HUMAN ELEMENTS/ ACTORS People who opposed the 3 farm bills	**NON-HUMAN ELEMENTS ACTORS/ ACTANTS** Internet infrastructures– hardware and software (mobile phones, laptops, cellphone towers, wifi), transportation infrastructures (highways, metro, autorickshaws, tractors)
COLLECTIVE HUMAN ELEMENTS/ ACTORS Farmer unions, the central government, police journalists, internet advocacy groups, media	**IMPLICATED/SILENT ACTORS/ACTANTS** Protestors
DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL AND/OR COLLECTIVE HUMAN ACTORS Corporate intervention into government mechanism, accusation against farmers– Khalistani, foreign funding, anti-national	**DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF NONHUMAN ACTANTS** Restrictions on physical movement, denial of access to communication, electricity and water.
POLITICAL/ECONOMIC ELEMENTS Central government, Farmer unions, APMC Mandis, big corporations	**SOCIOCULTURAL/SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS** Farmer pride, Sikh pride, camaraderie and
TEMPORAL ELEMENTS Prolonged commute to protest site, slow data speed, urgency of press dispatch	**SPATIAL ELEMENTS** National highways, suburban regions, distance from parliament, long stretches of protest site

For this chapter, I emphasise the situational map aspect of the situational analyses method. I map out the various actors involved in the situation of a protest that has faced communication blackout at various levels throughout the duration of the protest. In this chapter, I will be using in-depth interviews of protestors, journalists, and internet advocacy groups to understand how internet

shutdowns played out during the farmers' protest. The protest started in late 2020 and went on till the controversial farm laws were repealed in November 2021. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. At the time of the interviews, the protest had just been called off and protesters had vacated the different protest sites. All interviews were conducted online, on Zoom, in 2022, between February and August.

In this chapter, I draw on interviews with protestors (2), journalists (3), and civil society activists (2), who have engaged with the protest to understand how the movement as a whole negotiated through the periods of communication disruption. In my conversations, my focus was to understand in what ways people were dependent on the internet for the purpose of the protest, and how connectivity is understood vis-a-vis shutdowns in the larger context of the country. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity. The transcribed interviews have been coded into similar groups and analysed based on intersecting and recurring ideas and experiences. In the following sections, I unpack the various themes that emerged in these analyses and lay out the strategies and techniques used to manage communications and sustain the movement over the duration of the protest.

Table 4.2 List of interviews conducted.

Individual	**Role**	**Organisation**
Jaspreet	Protestor	No affiliation
Deepinder	Protestor	No affiliation
Sara	Journalist	The Quint
Aquib	Fellow/ journalist	People's Archive at Rural India (PARI)
Mukesh	Journalist	The Outlook
Riya	Independent researcher	No affiliation
Goutham	Lawyer	Internet Freedom Foundation

4.4 The Case: The Farmers' Protest

Farmers from across the Northern region of the Indian subcontinent came together to oppose three farm laws that had been passed by the central government in September 2019. Farmers came in large numbers to join the protests, from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Bihar, and Jharkhand. Their initial target was to reach the national capital, Delhi, but they were stopped by the police force at the borders of the city. Instead of returning home, the farmers started a sit-in protest at the very borders of these places—which are now well-known areas—Singhu (which is on the Delhi–Haryana border, to the North of the capital), Tikri (which is in the West, on the Delhi–Haryana border), and Ghazipur (to the East, on the Delhi–Up border; Figure 4.1).

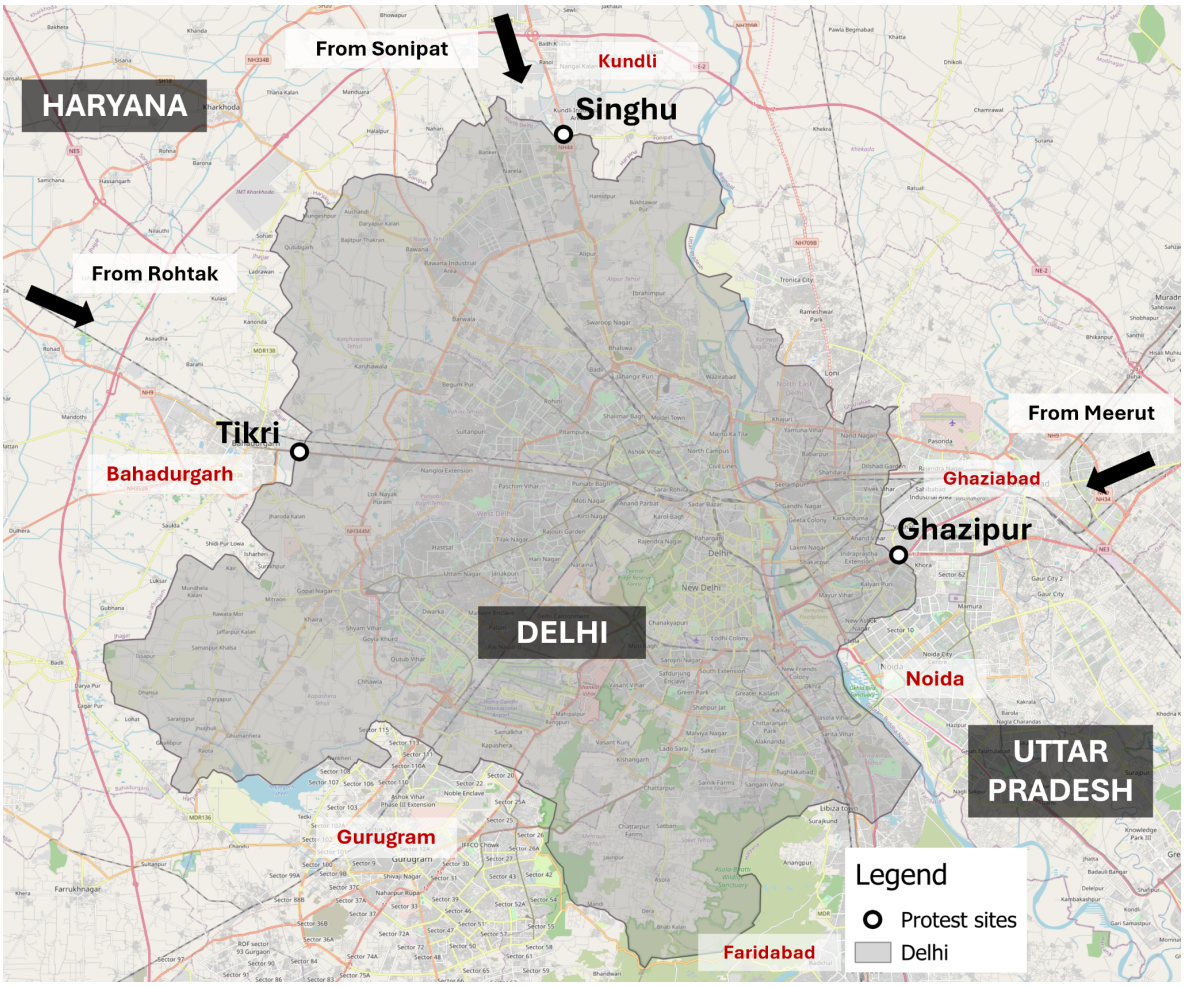


Figure 4.1: Map of Delhi NCR, marking the protest sites.

The three farm laws that were opposed are listed below:

1. The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act: This essentially allowed farmers to sell outside of the Agricultural Produce & Livestock Market Committee, Mandis (which are regulated market-places for agricultural produce, where farmers sold to licensed commission agents), and enabled intra-state and inter-state trade.

2. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act: This act aimed to provide a legal framework for contract farming, where farmers entered into contracts with private buyers, specifying terms and conditions for the sale of their agricultural produce. It is intended to facilitate competitive investments in the sector, promote better price assurance, and access to modern farming technologies.

3. The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act: This is an amendment to an existing act, which seeks to remove certain commodities, such as cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onions, and potatoes, from the list of essential commodities. It aims to remove stock holding limits on these items so that it can attract private investments in the storage of such commodities (Tiwari & Sharma, 2021).

The opposition to these laws from farmer unions was manifold. The APMC Mandis is where the crop is ensured to be sold at a Minimum Support Price to the licensed commissioned agents from the farmer. Minimum Support Price would not exist if the market was liberalised to allow private players to enter outside the Mandi set-up. This could weaken APMC Mandis, undermining the infrastructure, market regulation, and support mechanisms that currently benefit farmers, particularly small and marginal farmers. They feared that they would be vulnerable to exploitation and find it difficult to secure fair pricing. The involvement of private players like big corporations would, they argued, take away the bargaining power of small farmers in contract-based farming. This would gradually lead to market dominance by large corporations, reduced competition, and

limit choices for farmers to sell. These laws were framed and passed without consultations with farmers (Bhatnagar, 2021).

Communication channels that convey a movement's perspective both to the general public and to the policy makers are central to democratic participation. Castells (2015, p.257) notes in his book Networks of Outrage and Hope, that "people can only challenge domination by connecting with each other, by sharing outrage, by feeling togetherness, and by constructing alternative projects for themselves and for society at large." In contemporary times, the internet becomes the channel that sustains this outrage and engages people to construct alternative realities.

The following sub-section outlines the themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. I look at how internet networks become essential during a social movement for communication amongst themselves, how protestors find ways to work around internet shutdowns, how the nature of protests has changed with the coming of internet-based communication, and finally how journalists have to adapt and overcome disconnectivity while reporting from locations with capricious networks.

4.4.1. Protest Communication

Internet connectivity for those at the protest site became very important. The protestors started a newsletter called Trolley Times, which initially emerged over social media networks. One of the respondents recalls that they learned they were a part of the newsletter only when they went onto Instagram to find themselves tagged in a post by a friend to send in stories from the different border sites occupied by protestors.

Jaspreet (personal communication, February 5, 2022), a protestor, said that even on "normal" days when there was no official shutdown, they would have to travel for a few kilometres from the site of the protest to attend a video call or to send a multimedia clip over the internet. Protestors sitting at

the border had connectivity issues from the very beginning, in November 2020. Trolley Times (Figure 2) was started by some of the protestors as a trilingual newsletter (published in Gurmukhi, Hindi, and English), with the first issue launched on December 18, 2020. There were more newsletters apart from Trolley Times, like Karti Dharti, which is a women-led newsletter that brought diverse voices from the farmers' movement in a fortnightly publication. Jaspreet, who was also one of the people responsible for starting the Trolley Times, mentioned that the content for the newsletter came from many different places, such as videos, pictures, and stories, through a collaborative process that the internet afforded. This initially was published bi-weekly and later became a weekly newsletter because of various other on-ground engagements that the protestors were involved in.

The Singhu border, which was the biggest among the three sit-in camps, had a media centre. This was set up primarily to coordinate information going out to the press because many journalists were coming to this location to cover the protests. Deepinder (personal communication, February 23, 2022), who was at Singhu and was responsible for the media centre, said that their press releases and the information they officially put out were very necessary to counter the mainstream media channels, which he claimed were "spreading lies" about the farmers' motive to protest. He said that since all the farmers were not literate, it was necessary for a responsible translator to ensure they were not being misunderstood and misrepresented. Most farmers conversed in the Punjabi language which was not understood by some journalists who came to the protest site. Younger protestors would help these journalists translate to Hindi and English languages to further news reportage that carried their voices. Everyday communication was targeted by the authorities, he said:

> Since 27th November, 2020 it (slow internet) was there. Initially, we thought the government had put jammers. And some of them (protestors) identified that they were jammers. But even jammers had their limitation of 1–2 kilometres, and the protest site was

> 13–14 kilometres. The users increased rapidly, and the internet connectivity got very slow. We spent the first 3 months with very slow internet. (Deepinder, interview, February 23, 2022)

An important strategy for those at the media centre handling X was to post first-hand accounts of events; i.e., they only posted in the first person and never re-posted. These posts would sometimes be picked up by mainstream media channels as official communication from protestors to report their own stories. Narratives coming from protestors themselves, about why they were protesting, and how they were being treated by police authorities were of immense value. Jaspreet (interview, February 5, 2022) says: "we thought of countering fake narratives...which said farmers were not protesting the three laws, but they were fighting for a separate state." The mainstream media channels and the big news broadcasters were running stories that criminalised the protestors, calling them "Khalistanis" (likening them to a militant separatist group that had acquired notoriety in the 1980s) disguised to cause trouble in the capital (Singh, 2023).

Many reporters and journalists from the mainstream media channels did not come to these protest sites as access to the site was difficult and the threat of a police crackdown was imminent. They relied on correspondence from the protestors at the media centre, which sent press releases, images, and videos from the protest site to the institutional and mainstream media. It was important for them to be seen and heard, therefore, the protestors at the media centre went to lengths to ensure that it was done. Connectivity to the internet at these locations of protest was quite unreliable and fragile. One of my respondents, who was active at the media centre, referred to these media houses as "NOIDA media," given most of their offices are located in the NOIDA area of Delhi's National Capital Region. Jaspreet narrates a story of what she had to go through to send a short video to the press:

> We recorded that video clip. And then it took us three or four hours to send that one, two minute long video clip. Because, first we tried on the protest side from different internet connections. Then we went to a nearby local hotel to ask them for internet which didn't work. Then we took the metro and went to Bahadurgarh city metro station. (Nearest metro station to the Tikri border) Then we de-boarded the train there and then we went to a mobile shop, there we asked for a wifi connection, it was around 10pm they were about to close the shop. At that time we successfully transferred the video and came back. (Jaspreet, interview, February 5, 2022)

Under such restricted connectivity, protestors undertook considerable efforts to ensure that their perspectives reached mainstream media outlets. BBC News (Menon & Carmichael, 2021) reports that, on social media networks, there was a barrage of coordinated fake news that was circulated using fake profiles, which was trying to discredit the cause of the movement. Menon and Carmicheal (2021) report that the fake profiles "used Sikh names and claimed to be "Real Sikhs". They used the hashtags #RealSikh to endorse, and #FakeSikh to discredit, different political viewpoints." Such efforts to misdirect and undermine the movement's cause was all the more reason for protestors to go the extra mile to ensure that their narratives found representation in the mainstream media.

4.4.2. Traditional vs Digital Activism

Farmers have displayed dissent in the past too, without the help of the internet. For instance, in 2017, farmers from the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu staged demonstrations in Delhi, demanding drought relief and waiver of loans. They brought skulls of those farmers who died by suicide, used dead rats and snakes as food, shaved their heads, and other extreme forms to show their dire conditions. They called off their protest after 41 days, only after receiving assurances from their chief minister and the union finance minister (PTI, 2017). This type of protest may be

described as a traditional protest. Here traditional protests refer to those which do not use the internet as a mode of spreading information or gathering support.

When asked about whether social media support translates into garnering on-ground numbers, Jaspreet said that this support did not sustain. They said that social media does not tell you how many people actually support your cause, but on the ground, you have real numbers. And even the way your own social media feed is curated can deceive you into thinking everyone is with you, giving you a false sense of solidarity. They also note that the people influenced by social media are urban and young. Having been at the protest site since the beginning, they say that:

> Those who got influenced by seeing things on social media were the urban and young generation, who came from major cities of Punjab, or Delhi. They came in large numbers initially, but their visits were not long lasting. When the initial craze died down, it eventually became a traditional protest site. (Jaspreet, personal communication, February 5, 2022)

Most of the protesters who were physically present there from the beginning were farmers and their families who came from the most rural parts of the states. Jaspreet does not dismiss the role of social media entirely, however, they say that these online networks are very useful in keeping the narrative alive. Digital activism generates discourse, but only as long as the on-ground protest continues to exist. They say that online activism can be used as a "tool to aid" the already existing protest. Referring to the anti-CAA protests that happened just before the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, they say:

> I feel in this, your campaigning/digital activism can exist as long as your ground activism is going on. Like we saw in the anti-CAA movement, if it was to be sustained digitally, it could have stayed alive through lockdown. But as soon as it ceased to exist on the ground, it was also gone from the digital media spaces. This movement went on for so long only because

> people actually came out of their homes, and sat on the roads, actually people were fighting and actually people were dying. That's why the momentum was there in the digital space. So in digital space, it cannot exist independently for long. The life of a political or social issue in the digital sphere, is at 1 or 2 weeks maximum, not more than that. On Twitter, it is a matter of a few hours. Did something trend? Ok, it's finished. Just because some news media channels have started doing segments that talk about what's trending on Twitter, it doesn't mean it will lead to a political change. (Jaspreet, personal communication, February 5, 2022)

Castells (2015, p.243) also makes this observation that "...it is essential to keep in mind that not all contemporary social protests are expressions of this new form of social movement…Even if they do use social networks and ultimately disrupt social order by demonstrating in the streets." Therefore, the physical presence of protestors in the face of danger and precarity cannot be entirely replaced by the support in digital spaces.

All three protest sites, at Singhu, Tikri, and Ghazipur, had camps that extended several kilometres. Therefore, being connected to the internet was also necessary for everyday communication for those at the protest site. Several WhatsApp groups were created to coordinate the next steps and strategies amongst those at the protest site. Protestors also used VoIP calls to stay in touch with their family, that was back at home. Protestors used the internet for entertainment purposes as well. However, it is important to note that connection to the internet was not constant or strong throughout. More often than not, people would travel a few kilometres away from the protest camp to be able to receive any meaningful internet connection.

One of the observations that Aquib, a journalist that I interviewed, made was that farmers themselves did not rely on the internet for day-to-day activities. He observed that the panchayat system in Punjab and Haryana is very strong. Panchayat is a local governing body at the grassroots

level. Every panchayat leader would communicate with ward members who would relay it to the larger public. The protesters took turns in batches to stay at the site, while some of their families stayed back to look after their farmlands. It was through the panchayats that the farmers knew when to come and go. Most of the coordination work about the farmlands at home was done over regular calls. During the long periods of wait, the protesters would sometimes want to watch movies and listen to songs and news, which was initially difficult. However, the next time they came back to the protest site, they would have downloaded movies to watch at their leisure (Aquib, personal communication, August 21, 2022).

Protestors also used the internet to connect with people and solidarity groups who were outside the country, in Canada and the UK. My respondents informed me that they would use webinars and Zoom meetings to inform those abroad of the situation on the ground and of ways in which they can support and contribute to the protest.

4.4.3. Workarounds During Network Disruptions

The farmers' protest, which started in late 2020, faced the same problems of internet shutdowns as the protestors in Hong Kong had experienced earlier that year. The protestors in Hong Kong, mostly young, worked around shutdowns by using alternative bluetooth-based apps, like Bridgefy, to stay connected under a blackout (Wakefield, 2019). When asked if such apps assisted the protesting farmers, the response was negative. My respondent said that they did not make use of Bluetooth-based apps under conditions of disconnectivity for many reasons: Firstly, most of the farmers came from rural backgrounds and not all had smartphones. Apps like Bridgefy and Signal rely on Bluetooth to work effectively when many people have the app on their mobiles, so the signal can jump from the nearest device to another to reach the intended recipient. To use this app, one has to be technologically literate and skilled, which was a barrier for most people at the protest site. As a

result, even for younger protestors, it became very difficult and unreliable to depend on these mobile applications.

Interestingly, although the protestors may not have been savvy enough to use Bluetooth apps, they were well aware of surveillance tactics employed by the government. A protester shared that one day some placards announcing free wifi connection had popped up overnight, near the Singhu stage area, providing credentials to connect to the network. There was no information provided on who had facilitated the service. Despite people constantly facing poor to no connection inside the protest area, most protestors were aware that they should not connect to unknown networks. There was widespread fear of surveillance and hacking of phones amongst the protesters, something that often came up in their discussions. In another instance, six people lost their mobile phones in a matter of 15 days, all of them suspected to be stolen. From then on, they started using small dumb phones, without internet connectivity, to avoid "Pegasus-like snooping." The protestors were selectively disconnected, not from digital fatigue but for digital security. Being connected to a smartphone became a weakness in this situation, where the issues of privacy and safety arise.

When people at the protest site could not send correspondence to media persons, they would send pictures and videos to friends in Canada, US, and Australia for safekeeping, who would then send them on to the intended recipients. Protestors further faced obstacles to accessing the internet with electronic hardware stores, which refused to sell adapters and routers to protestors to install new connections by the instruction of police and government officials. Electricity and water supply was also cut off in addition to the internet, as a blackmailing tactic, to pressure protestors into leaving the site.

Jaspreet made an interesting observation about the spatiality of the internet shutdowns. The Singhu and Tikri protest sites were located outside the capital in working-class colonies. The Singhu site was located in the Kundli industrial belt, while Tikri was in the suburban area of Bahadurgarh, in

both these places residents did not display a huge outcry over internet shutdowns. She says that people did not have the same kind of dependency on the internet as in the centre of the city. It can be compared with the shorter and more localised shutdowns that occurred within the city limits of Delhi (Express Web Desk, 2021). Similarly, Goutham, who works with the Internet Freedom Foundation, notes that enough conversation about shutdowns does not take place because "shutdowns have targeted communities which are historically marginalised…shutdowns imposed in Kashmir and parts of Kashmir which are prone to violence… or would take place in Jharkhand or north-east (India)" (Goutham, personal communication, February 23, 2022). Therefore, he says, mainstream media would anyway not come across opinions of people from those places. He notes the several contestations that exist between the urban and rural, and more particularly the imposition of shutdowns for prolonged durations in historically marginalized, and politically sensitive areas.

The digital divide that was present in the suburbs was in stark contrast to the high dependency that more urban areas have on the internet for day-to-day activities. Disconnection and unreliable connection are the norm rather than an exception in these suburbs and rural areas, where the protest sites were established. The critical infrastructures needed for steady internet connectivity is through broadband or optical fibre cable network. This wired connectivity remains concentrated in urban areas, perpetuating the digital divide and impacting rural users adversely (Thomas, 2025).

4.4.4. Reporting Without the Internet

On January 26, 2021, which marks India's Republic Day, the biggest altercation took place between the police and the protestors in the capital, New Delhi. Of all the shutdowns imposed in the country to suppress information from protesting farmers, it was during the Republic Day tractor parade that the most severe and complete blackouts occurred. It was highlighted in the press as well as by the people on the protest site that the network disruption occurred not only on Republic Day but the

following days as well. Leading up to Republic Day, a tractor rally was called for by the Samyukt Kisan Morcha, an umbrella organisation of 32 farmer unions (Mitra & Regan, 2021). Thousands of protestors clashed with the police during the tractor parade called by farmer unions on January 26, demanding a repeal of the laws. After several protestors from Singhu and Ghazipur changed their route, they marched towards Central Delhi's ITO and Red Fort, where police resorted to teargas shelling and lathi charges, while some protestors vandalised public property and attacked police personnel. At Red Fort, a section of protesters climbed poles and walls and hoisted the Nishan Sahib flag (Arvin, 2021). This crackdown led to an internet shutdown inside the national capital, Delhi, for the first time during the protest, which was until now only restricted to the bordering villages (Express Web Desk, 2021). The official shutdown was called by the state home secretary, on 26th and 27th January, 2021 (Agarwal, 2021). In Haryana, shutdowns were seen on 31 January 2021, which extended to 1 February 2021 (DNA Web Team, 2021). However, the internet was not back until a few days later. Deepinder says:

> On 26th January, at 4 or 5 o' clock, internet was shut down at all borders. From 26th January till 6th of February it was the hardest period for us. We were working in the media (centre) and we were sending the press notes, and every minute updates. I used to go 3–4 kilometres towards the Delhi side and send press notes. Many times, it was very hard for us to get published in the next day's newspaper." (Deepinder, personal communication, February 23, 2022)

In my interviews with journalists, many expressed that reporting from protest locations comes with a unique set of challenges. A reporter, Aquib, described how he would go to the location to report:

> You prepare yourself for anything that could come to you, come your way in a conflict zone where you don't know whether a gunshot will be fired or not. So, you roam around with your bike's helmet on your head and your bag on your back and another bag in front of your

> chest with some shield inside the bag so that even if you get fired at, at least you'll be safe....I'm walking with two litres of water, water bottles on both sides of my bag. (Aquib, interview, August 21, 2022)

Such precautions would be useful, they say, in the event of tear gas shelling or if someone is hit by a stone and starts bleeding.

An interview with Sara, a female journalist with Quint also echoes the precarity in reporting from the field. Her experience with reporting on the tractor rally on 26th January, 2021 is notable. Her journey started with three other journalists and a friend from Jamia Millia Islamia metro station at 6am to reach Singhu border, where the rally started from. Metro routes were disrupted and metro stations were being closed abruptly. When they deboarded the metro they hired an autorickshaw which dropped them off 5 kilometers from the protest site, because of police barricades. They had to cover the remaining distance of 4-5 kilometers on foot. By the time they reached Singhu, it was 8am and the rally had already started. By the time the tractors reached the Red Fort, there was a complete internet shutdown. When she returned to Jamia after witnessing the flag hoisting and the rally at 8pm, there was no internet. However, around 9pm she said, "I posted one story on Instagram which took half an hour to upload. Regular calls too were not clear" (Sara, personal communication, September 17, 2022). Clearly, the extent and intensity of shutdown of communication and movement on Republic Day was particularly severe.

Mukesh, another reporter, said that it was very difficult to capture everything if you were not writing notes at the same time while the event was happening. So, they would take notes and write the full piece before sending an email from a location far from the protest site. On a few occasions, the reporter wrote articles on SMSs and sent a long chain of them to their editors at the office. The reporters I spoke to made a similar observation as the protestors: They would move two to three kilometres away from the protest site to be able to send reports with multimedia files. Many

journalists practised going out of the site area to send correspondence to their offices (Mukesh, interview, August 31, 2022).

4.4.5 Responses by civil society organisations

Goutham, a lawyer with the Internet Freedom Foundation, says that authorities make a "logical leap" when they justify these shutdowns. Referring to the explanations given by authorities, he says, they "simply mention that they fear that if the internet is allowed to continue, then fake news will spread, and fake news will lead to violence… without explaining how exactly the internet is enabling the spread of violence" (Goutham, personal communication, February 23, 2022). Further, the socioeconomic aspect of the impact of shutdowns cannot be ignored. Goutham says that any one using mobile data gets affected first, which is the cheapest way to be connected to the internet. People with broadband and WiFi connections have to invest more to have these systems in place, and are less likely to be affected by the shutdown. So there is a hierarchy to the effects of a shutdown that are inadvertently linked to capital and privilege.

My interview with Riya, an independent researcher, says that whether we consider the internet to be a fundamental right or not, is secondary. Because, constitutional rights and liberties such as right to livelihood, education, freedom of speech and expression now take place on the internet, the plea to the right of connectivity can be made. However, private corporations account for approximately 95 percent of Internet Service Providers in India, while the two public sector companies, BSNL and MTNL, together hold less than a 5 percent share (Moinuddin, 2021). Since internet access requires the significant involvement of private players, this promise cannot be made by the government without major caveats. She articulates the conundrum of this access by comparing it to migrant workers stranded under the first Covid-19 lockdown. She says, "only those who could afford plane tickets could travel back freely" (Riya, personal communication, February 11, 2022), and the rest had to wait for buses and trains to be arranged by the government to reach their homes (The New

Indian Express, 2020). She says, “the fact that everyone was not able to afford is a reality...but should they have access to affordable travel and accommodation or not? Yes. Similarly, I don't have internet is a reality. But I should have internet, (and that) is my fundamental right” (Riya, personal communication, February 11, 2022). Therefore, she makes the case that, because many people currently cannot access (or afford) the internet, does not mean they should not have access. Because, much like other essential needs, people ought to have access to the internet.

But does the right to express oneself, or participate in political dialogue, and development mean that governments are obliged to provide the technological means? Jørgensen (2014) asks this question to people like Riya, who frame access in terms of human rights. To fulfil this expectation, we see that the onus not only falls on governments but private actors who are not in the business of welfare. While governments may not be strictly obliged to supply technological means in the way that they provide public goods like water and electricity, they are increasingly seen as responsible for accessibility, affordability, and non-discriminatory availability of such technologies (Kaye, 2016).

4.5. Conclusion

The ubiquity of digital technology and our reliance on it has increased substantially in the last few decades. As reflected in this chapter, our need for digital connectivity is not only regarding routine civic participation and access to services but also to engage in democratic dialogue and to talk back to the state. In societies where large populations are not connected to the internet in a meaningful way, voluntary disconnective action becomes an exception. 106 is often imposed by the state to disempower people, in this case, the protesting farmers.

The chapter looked at the specific case of the farmers’ protest in India, during 2020–2021. I discussed the various experiences that people faced at the protest site. The clampdown on dissent by

the government occurred at various phases through different means, such as throttling and shutting down networks, and denying access to infrastructure that supports internet connectivity and their daily activities. I examined how protestors and journalists also found ways to work around the restrictions imposed upon them.

The internet shutdowns during the farmers' protest in India can be analysed within the broader literature on censorship and disconnectivity, particularly in the context of state control over information, suppression of dissent, and the impact on democratic processes. The literature on censorship often discusses how governments use various tools to control information flow, including traditional media censorship, surveillance, and internet shutdowns. Internet shutdowns thus are a modern extension of censorship, where the state directly limits access to information by disabling digital communication networks. Disconnectivity in this context examines how such deliberate measures by the state are used not just to prevent the spread of information but to isolate communities and weaken movements by cutting off their ability to coordinate. The internet shutdowns during the farmers' protest can be seen as a form of enforced disconnectivity aimed at breaking the protestors' momentum by severing their communication channels. Internet shutdowns can be seen as a violation of the right to freedom of expression and access to information, which are essential for informed citizen participation in a democracy. Internet shutdowns often disproportionately affect marginalised communities who rely on digital communication for access to essential services, education, and economic activities–activities of daily living that have nothing to do with politics or dissent. The farmers' protest, largely driven by rural communities, exemplifies how such measures can exacerbate existing inequalities and undermine the rights of vulnerable populations. In India, the use of internet shutdowns during the farmers' protest raises concerns about the erosion of democratic norms and the state's increasing reliance on digital

authoritarianism. The Indian case adds to the growing concern about the future of digital activism in an era where states are increasingly willing to use internet shutdowns as a tool of repression.

State and central governments in India continue to restrict media and communication networks rampantly. “Although we counted fewer than 100 shutdowns in India for the first time since 2017, we’re not convinced Indian authorities have embarked on the path toward positive, sustained change with regard to digital rights” (Access Now, 2023, p. 18). While the number of shutdowns may have decreased in 2022 that certainly makes up for the increased social media censorship that is rising proportionally.

Despite the challenges posed by internet shutdowns and restrictions on communication, the resilience and ingenuity of citizens and protestors demonstrate that democratic engagement cannot be easily silenced. Workarounds, alternative networks, and persistent demands for rights show that digital infrastructures, while vulnerable, also offer opportunities for reclaiming agency and asserting voice. This resilience points to a broader possibility: that through collective action, advocacy, policy reforms, and access to communication can increasingly be recognised as a public good, ensuring that the democratic ideals of participation, accountability, and inclusion continue to be realised. In the Indian context, such efforts reaffirm that democracy is not merely a constitutional framework but a living, evolving project, strengthened each time citizens assert their right to be heard and to connect.

Conclusion: Current Relevance and Future Directions

This study of internet shutdowns reveals how deeply intertwined the questions of law, technology, and politics are in shaping democratic processes. It also shows how digital infrastructures mediate rights and freedoms, and how citizens negotiate power in times of repression. The analysis offered in the thesis underscores the tension between state's claims to security and order on one hand, and the constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and assembly on the other. At the same time, the study illustrates how citizens actively resist, reinterpret, and reclaim narrative agency, using a variety of workarounds that may or may not involve digital technology.

A look at the thesis from a bird's eye view– internet shutdowns during protests movements in India, largely deals with two frameworks. One is the internet, or new media. Second is the subject of movements itself– how and why people congregate, around what issues, and what enables them to do so. Any history of media shows that the shape and form of a medium changes as technology changes. And this change depends on capital, power, society, and culture. There is a revolutionary expectation that emerges from every new media. So it was with the printing press, the radio, broadcast television, and now the internet (Castells, 2015, p.15). Whether such new technologies succeed in fulfilling popular imaginations is a test of time. And the internet is still unfolding its many possibilities. Movements too have evolved with technology as modes and patterns of communication change. Pamphlets and newspapers during the French revolution and the Indian Independence movement; television and photography during the American civil rights movements and anti-Vietnam war protests in the United States; and social media platforms since the Arab

Spring, all demonstrate how media have historically been the vehicles to expose injustices and to bolster the cause of the protestors. In every instance censorship, intimidation, and shutdown have been common practices employed by those in power. Against this historical background, the study of internet shutdowns in India is a continuous project.

The thesis looks at two different case studies- the Farmers' protest and the anti-CAA protests. Both of these cases offer different insights into the movements and the role that the internet has played. Here are a few ways in which I compare and contrast the cases. The two protests navigated physical spaces very differently. The anti-CAA protests occurred simultaneously throughout the country, with regional activities organised more or less independently from one another, by citizens' groups and civil society organisations located in those particular cities and towns. The Farmers' protest on the other hand, was a highly organised protest gathering which was a coming together of farmers from Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Haryana, led by farmer unions. Although the major protest sites were located in three different places- in Sighu, Tikri, and Gazipur they still acted as a single unit, where news about one site was shared at another keeping everyone informed about the status of their protest, and the negotiations with the government.

Another aspect that affected both cases was the nationwide Covid-19 lockdown. The anti-CAA protests started before the lockdown, and failed to sustain in both the online and offline spaces with the lockdown in place. The sit-in protest site at Shaheen Bagh by Muslim women was cleared within a few days of the lockdown being announced. The unprecedented scale of the pandemic stalled any protest activity that was happening on ground. This absence of a protest site also fizzled out the discourse online. The Farmers' protest on the other hand started in September 2020, when Unlock 4.0 was in effect, where many exceptions were made including allowing gatherings upto 50 people (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020). However, in 2021, when the second wave of Covid hit the country and once again there was minimal movement of people, the Farmers' protests were still in

force. It was only in November 2021 that the protests were called off, after the farm laws were successfully repealed. This shows that the protests started and continued even in the face of major restrictions to movement. One reasonable explanation is that the networks which were formed and augmented in the anti-CAA protests were largely through the internet, which may be thought of as weak connections (McAdam, 1986; Zuckerman, 2013). This was combined with the onset of an unprecedented pandemic. The farmers on the other hand were part of farmer unions which are offline networks that were formed outside the internet, and sustained without the need for digital mediation. Only a small section of supporters of the movement were informed through the media and participated as a result of information shared through online platforms.

The approach to methodology that I took to both cases is also different. With the anti-CAA protests, looking at the occurrence through newspaper reports caused a flattening of the shutdown events and the protests. By flattening, I mean, that the multiplicity and diversity of experience of the people on the protest site was limited to whatever the articles reported on. My approach to the Farmers' protest on the other hand was on an individual level with interviews of protestors and journalists who offered rich and particular anecdotal recollections.

Another aspect of the two cases is the dynamic nature of the legal landscape in the country. When the anti-CAA protests took place, the legal provisions available to implement a shutdown was actually limited to only the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules, 2017. State governments could invoke these rules to order a shutdown in temporary capacity, within geographical limits. However, Section 144 of CrPC that pertains to ordering curfews in times of emergencies at the district level, has been used innumerable times in the past to order shutdowns. The section was interpreted broadly and freely to include communication shutdowns to prevent any immediate disturbance and restore public safety. However, in January 2021, after the case of Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India, orders under

suspension rules and orders under section 144 CrPC were relooked at by the Supreme Court of India. Stricter guidelines and more transparency was demanded from the state by the judiciary following this case. With these legal changes coming into force in 2021, shutdowns during the Farmers' protest needed to be accounted for by the state. However, from the interviews it was evident that blackouts were experienced by protestors well beyond the period stated in the shutdown orders.

Cyber utopianism (Morozov, 2011), that refers to the emancipatory nature of online communication does not take into account the control mechanisms that the same digital systems enable. Countries across the political spectrum have embraced digital technology to serve them in efficient governance, such as India, the United States, China, Russia, Iran, etc. We also see that this system enables continuous monitoring and surveillance on its users. Chun (2006) writes that when freedom is conflated with control, it produces and is produced by paranoia, "a paranoia that stems from the attempt to solve political problems technologically". This perspective helps illuminate the paradox of internet shutdowns in India. Shutdowns are often justified by the state as necessary for maintaining freedom from violence, freedom from misinformation, and freedom to live securely in times of unrest. Yet, these very acts of control curtail fundamental freedoms of speech, expression, and assembly. In this sense, freedom and control are conflated, where the state argues that freedom can only be secured through restriction. This conflation is what Chun calls paranoia– where citizens experience anxiety from recognising that their freedoms are conditional, and the state fears that dissenting publics might destabilize authority. Shutdowns thus can be seen as technological attempts to solve what are essentially political problems. Instead of engaging dissent and protest with dialog and democratic processes, the state turns to a technical fix of controlling connectivity.

State control over the internet represents the most recent iteration in the long history of techniques used to restrict freedom of speech and expression. Historically, governments relied on curfews, the

suspension of publications, or physically barricaded roads to contain dissent and limit assembly. Internet shutdowns extend these practices into the digital realm, functioning as online curfews that silence voices and obstruct democratic channels (Chun, 2006; Zuboff, 2019). In the Indian context, such practices echo constitutional debates about the scope and limits of free speech, where balancing state security and individual freedoms get contested.

While I write this conclusion, Nepal is undergoing a tumultuous time where Gen-Z youth is protesting and revolting against a corrupt government. This uprising is also attributed to the ban of 26 social media platforms, following which Nepali youth took to the streets. The social media ban came into place for non-compliance by platforms including Meta (Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram), Alphabet (Youtube), X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, and LinkedIn– of the Directives for Managing the Use of Social Networks, 2023. The Directives issued require platforms to establish a local liaison office, appoint a grievance officer, and implement self-regulation mechanisms (Chaulagain, 2025). The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology released a notice stating that platforms should apply for listing within 7 days, from 28th August to 3rd September, 2025. These rules were put in place to monitor "unwanted content" and to curb harmful content and ensure accountability of tech companies operating in the country (Baral, 2025). As mentioned in Chapter 2, India too, has formulated new Information Technology Rules 2023, to regulate and hold digital platforms accountable for speech exercised on their platforms. However, strict deadlines for local registrations have not been imposed upon social media offices, yet.

Another surprising turn of events occurred when Gen-Z protestors informally elected the interim Prime Minister of Nepal, Sushila Kharki through the gaming chat platform- Discord (Jayakumar, 2025). This is probably the first prominent political use of a social media platform, wherein a national leader was chosen on the internet. It is important to remember that this massive protest, like all political uprisings, was faced with violent crackdown and loss of life. The death toll was marked

at 72, which includes 59 demonstrators, 10 inmates, and 3 police personnel (NDTV, 2025). It is easy to forget that there are real consequences to actions that take root online when we only look at the emancipatory nature of the internet.

Questions remain about whether democratic processes should be affected by social media platforms, or whether platform regulation by the state is justified as a means of corporate accountability, or whether state control and citizen freedom are mutually exclusive exercises. The questions discussed in this dissertation therefore continue to be highly relevant across the world, in contemporary times. And events that are unfolding globally are proof that discussion and deliberation about democratic dissent, free speech, censorship and shutdowns, are necessary and urgent. The thesis attempts to offer some insight in the Indian context and contribute to the larger scholarship on technologically mediated dissent.

Future research might further explore comparative perspectives on shutdowns beyond India, examine the long-term socio-economic impacts of recurring digital blackouts, or investigate the evolving role of global platform companies in destabilising political powers in some countries. Subsequent studies may look into the effects that shutdowns have on everyday commerce, specifically gig economies that originate on online platforms. This study can further be expanded to contribute to scholarship about digital 'public' infrastructures (DPI). There is a need to recognise and treat digital infrastructures as a public good, precisely because democratic processes are now taking place on the internet. Like roads, water, and electricity they enable access to essential services, and facilitate mobility of ideas and people. Digital connectivity, access, and literacy enables citizens to participate in public, economic, and cultural life. A report released by the UNDP in 2023 defines digital public infrastructure as

> a set of shared digital systems that should be secure and interoperable, and can be built on open standards and specifications to deliver and provide equitable access to public and/or

> private services at societal scale and are governed by applicable legal frameworks and enabling rules to drive development, inclusion, innovation, trust, and competition and respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. (United Nations Development Programme, 2023, p.3)

This framing of DPI places the responsibility of inclusion and upholding the rights and freedoms of its citizens on governments. The report goes on to demonstrate how DPIs are essential to achieve the all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduce inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace, justice and strong institutions, and partnerships for the goals.

In the same way, this thesis also contributes particularly to the discussions and debates on the 16th Sustainable Development Goal, which is peace, justice and strong institutions. This SDG promotes peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, and advocates to provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. The 16th SDG[15] further enlists targets, of which the following two are prominent for this thesis:

1. Target 16.A- ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms (in accordance with nation and international agreements)

2. Target 16.6- develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.

Internet shutdowns in India and elsewhere undermine these targets and erode the ability of citizens to exercise freedoms, and their trust in institutions which are meant to protect them. Shutdown fuels mistrust and exacerbates tensions, and silences peaceful dissent. This thesis documents these

[15] Goal 16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions https://globalgoals.org/goals/16-peace-justice-and-strong-institutions/

shutdowns to bring to the fore that such practices destabilize peace, weaken the pursuit of justice, and ultimately lead to the deterioration of a democracy.

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ANNEXURE

Annexure 1: Newspaper reports

S.no.	Date	Headline	URL
1	Dec 20, 2019	Internet shutdowns in Delhi" Bridgefy is a messaging app that doesn't need Internet.	https://indianexpress.com/article/technology/social/caa-protests-internet-shutdown-in-delhi-bridgefy-is-an-app-that-doesnt-need-internet-6174612/
2	Dec 20, 2019	First time, internet, voice, SMS shut down in Delhi.	https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/first-time-internet-voice-sms-shut-down-in-capital/
3	Dec 19, 2019	Citizenship Act: from Delhi to Bengaluru, protests rage across India; top 10 developments	https://indianexpress.com/article/india/citizenship-amendment-act-protests-delhi-bengaluru-ramachandra-guha-yogendra-yadav-detained-6174514/
4	Dec 11, 2019	Anti-Citizenship Bill protests: Army deployed inAssam, Tripura; internet suspended.	https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/anti-citizenship-bill-protests-army-deployed-in-assam-tripura-internet-suspended/article30277108.ece
5	Dec 20, 2019	Citizenship Act protests: internet services restored in Assam after 9 days.	https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/citizenship-act-protests-internet-services-restored-in-assam-after-9-days-6176244/
6	Dec 21, 2019	Taken offline for 9 days, Assam realises internet is much more than social media.	https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/caa-protests-assam-realises-internet-is-much-more-than-social-media-6177897/
7	Dec 10, 2019	Shop set on fire, clashes, stone pelting: North- East simmers over Citizenship Bill.	https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/northeast-citizenship-bill-bandh-protests-assam-tripura-manipur-6160392/
8	Dec 20, 2019	Mobile internet shutdowns in Lucknow, Ghaziabad, Mangalore amid anti-CAA protests.	https://indianexpress.com/article/technology/tech-news-technology/anti-citizenship-act-protests-mobile-internet-shutdown-in-parts-of-delhi-confirm-airtel-and-vodafone-6174586/
9	Dec 20, 2019	Anti-CAA protests: Mobile internet, SMS remain shut in parts of UP, including Lucknow.	https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/anti-caa-protests-mobile-internet-sms-remain-shut-in-parts-of-up-including-lucknow/article30356036.ece
10	Dec 21, 2019	Six killed in CAA protests across UP, net shutdown in several districts.	https://indianexpress.com/article/india/six-killed-in-caa-protests-across-up-net-shutdown-in-several-districts-6177753/
11	Dec 22, 2019	CAA protests spread across UP, toll now 15, CM Adityanath issues appeal for peace.	https://indianexpress.com/article/india/uttar-pradesh-citizenship-law-protest-violence-6179054/

12	Dec 24, 2019	Internet shutdown extended in Lucknow for fifth day.	https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/internet-shutdown-extended-in-lucknow-for-fifth-day/article61603267.ece
13	Dec 26, 2019	CAA protests: Section 144 imposed in Ghaziabad, internet suspended for 24 hours.	https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/lucknow/citizenship-amendment-act-protests-ghaziabad-up-police-6186342/

Digital barricades and blackout: Internet shutdowns in India

by Manisha Madapathi

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