INTERNET FREEDOM - GS II AND II MAINS

Q. Internet freedom is hallmark for the tech decade in India. Examine its need in lieu of emerging challenges in India. (15 marks, 250 words)

News: *Measuring internet freedom in Indiain the last 10 years*

What's in the news?

- India has consistently ranked first globally for five consecutive years in imposing internet bans, accounting for approximately 60% of all recorded blackouts worldwide between 2016 and 2022.

Key Trends of Internet Shutdowns in India:
Instances of Internet Shutdown:

- The Indian government enforced **780 shutdowns** between January 1, 2014, and December 31, 2023. Notable spikes occurred during significant events such as protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, the abrogation of Article 370, and the introduction of Farm Bills.

- In 2020, India accounted for over **70% of global economic losses due to internet disruptions**. In 2023 alone, the country experienced shutdowns totalling over 7,000 hours.

- **Jammu and Kashmir** witnessed the highest number of shutdowns in the last 12 years, with 433 occurrences. The longest blackout in 2023 persisted in Manipur for seven months amid ethnic clashes.

- Between 2015 and 2022, more than 55,000 websites were blocked, with the majority censored under **section 69A of the IT Act by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.**

Global Internet Freedom:

- The latest Freedom House report highlights the deteriorating global internet freedom, with conditions worsening in 29 countries for the 13th consecutive year.
- India's ranking has declined from 59 to 50 points between 2016 and 2023, indicating a concerning trend.

Provisions Related to Internet Shutdown:

- Section 5(2) of the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885, along with the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency and Public Safety) Rules, 2017, empower authorities to order internet shutdowns in case of emergencies or safety concerns.
- Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure allows district magistrates to issue orders, including internet suspension, to maintain public tranquility.

Need for Internet Shutdown in India:

1. Preventing Hate Speech and Misinformation:
- Shutdowns are argued to prevent the spread of hate speech and fake news, particularly during events like protests.

2. Preventing Anti-National Activities:
- Shutdowns are viewed as a measure to curb the organization and mobilization of protests that could disrupt public order and security.

3. Protecting National Security:
- Shutdowns are seen as necessary to protect national security and sovereignty from external threats and cyberattacks.

4. Curbing Objectionable Content Consumption:
- Shutdowns are believed to help control the distribution and consumption of content that could be harmful or offensive.

Concerns Related to Internet Shutdown:

1. Violation of Rights:
- Shutdowns violate fundamental rights, including the freedom of speech and expression, and the right to information.

2. Lack of Accountability:
- Shutdowns are often implemented without clear legal frameworks or oversight mechanisms, leading to arbitrary restrictions.

3. Economic Disruption:
- Shutdowns have significant economic repercussions, disrupting online commerce, communication, and financial transactions.

4. Social Disruption:
- Shutdowns impede communication networks, hindering access to vital services and isolating individuals from their communities.

Way Forward:
- Adhering to Supreme Court guidelines on temporary and proportionate use of shutdowns.
- Strengthening legal frameworks and ensuring compliance with human rights standards.
- Considering alternative measures before resorting to shutdowns.