

**The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE**

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—It's about quality—

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh stated that India has achieved 88% self-sufficiency in defence production and ₹23,000 crore in exports, with a target of ₹50,000 crore by 2029.

- ➔ He highlighted various aspects that the government is working on.

## Our aim is to reach defence exports worth ₹50,000 crore by 2029, says Rajnath Singh

**The Hindu Bureau**  
CHANDIGARH

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Monday said India had achieved 88% self-sufficiency in ammunition production, and defence exports had reached about ₹23,000 crore in 2023-24.

He was speaking at the 16th Foundation Day of the Indian Institute of Technology, Mandi in Himachal Pradesh.

“Our goal is to reach ₹50,000 crore in defence exports by 2029,” Mr. Singh said.

### **Economic growth**

The Minister said the government was committed to creating a robust defence industry in India, which supported the security of the nation and contributed to the country's economic growth.

He called upon IIT-Mandi students to contribute to this vision by focusing on technological solutions that would enhance India's defence capabilities and



Rajnath Singh

further advance the nation's self-reliance in this critical sector.

Emphasising the necessity of innovation and knowledge-creation in shaping the future of technology, Mr. Singh underscored the importance of fostering a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation that would allow India to lead in emerging fields, including artificial intelligence, machine learning, and digital technologies.

He asked the students to excel in technological innovation in order to make India a developed country by 2047, and advised them to follow the principles of

“initiate, improve, and transform (IIT)”.

“India's technological sector is on the rise and is expected to reach \$300-350 billion dollars in the next five years. With more than 1.25 lakh start-ups and 110 unicorns, our country is emerging as the third-largest startup ecosystem in the world,” Mr. Singh said.

### **Digital economy**

The Defence Minister highlighted India's digital economy.

“India's telecom sector is now the second-largest in the world. With the success of initiatives like UPI (Unified Payments Interface), India is setting global standards in digital transactions. We are in the midst of an unparalleled digital revolution. The students should actively contribute to the development of India's digital ecosystem as technological innovation is central to India's growth story in the coming decades,” Mr. Singh said.

### **Achievement in Defence Production and Exports**

- ▶ India has achieved 88% self-sufficiency in ammunition production.
- ▶ Defence exports have reached ₹23,000 crore in 2023-24.
- ▶ The government aims to increase defence exports to ₹50,000 crore by 2029.

### **Strengthening the Defence Industry**

- ▶ The government is focused on building a strong defence industry to ensure national security and economic growth.
- ▶ Students, especially from technical institutions, are encouraged to contribute to defence innovation and self-reliance.

### **Importance of Innovation and Entrepreneurship**

- ▶ Innovation and knowledge creation are key to India's technological leadership.
- ▶ The government promotes advancements in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and digital technologies.
- ▶ Students should adopt the principles of "initiate, improve, and transform (IIT)" to drive change and progress.

### **India's Growing Startup Ecosystem**

- ▶ India has a thriving startup ecosystem, with more than 1.25 lakh startups and 110 unicorns.
- ▶ The country is emerging as the third-largest startup hub globally.
- ▶ The technological sector in India is expected to grow to \$300-350 billion in the next five years.

### **Growth of India's Digital Economy**

- ▶ India has the second-largest telecom sector in the world.
- ▶ The success of UPI (Unified Payments Interface) has made India a global leader in digital transactions.
- ▶ A digital revolution is underway, and students are encouraged to contribute to India's digital ecosystem for long-term growth.

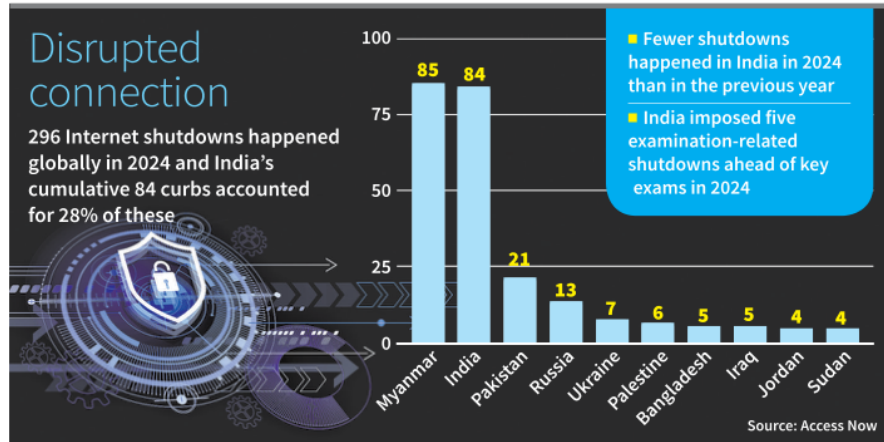
- A report by Access Now highlighted that in 2024, 296 internet shutdowns occurred worldwide, the highest number recorded in any year.

# Internet shutdowns highest in 2024 globally, India tops in government-ordered curbs

**Aroon Deep**  
NEW DELHI

India did not impose the highest number of Internet shutdowns last year, with Myanmar seeing one additional disruption in 2024, according to a report by the advocacy body Access Now. However, the number of shutdowns imposed by the government in charge – the Union and State governments here – is still higher in India.

Fewer shutdowns happened in India in 2024 than in the previous year. “People in 16 States and [Union] Territories experienced a shutdown, with State Government officials in Manipur (21), Haryana (12), and Jammu & Kashmir (12) topping the list of offenders in India,” the report said.



“Of the 84, 41 shutdowns were related to protests, and 23 were related to communal violence.”

More shutdowns happened globally in 2024 than in any past year.

In all, 296 Internet shutdowns happened globally in 2024, the report found,

and India’s cumulative 84 curbs accounted for 28% of these. Eighty-five were imposed in Myanmar, and 11 of these were a result of other countries and groups: “China imposed two [shutdowns on areas in Myanmar] and Thailand four, while the exiled Na-

tional Unity Government (NUG), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) imposed one shutdown each in areas they controlled. The remaining two shutdowns were imposed by unknown par-

ties,” the report said.

A particular focus of anti-shutdown advocates’ ire has been examination-related shutdowns. India imposed five such shutdowns ahead of key exams in 2024. One was during the General Graduate Level Combined Competitive Examinations in Jharkhand, which took place for five-and-a-half hours from September 22 morning through the afternoon.

That same month, Assam imposed similar shutdowns in most districts for government job exams.

Rajasthan issued a shutdown for the Rajasthan Public Service Commission exam in January. Exam-related Internet shutdowns are a disproportionate response to the possibility of cheating in exams, Access Now said.

- The report is titled “Embodened Offenders, Endangered Communities: Internet Shutdowns in 2024.”

## India-Specic Shutdowns

- India imposed 84 internet shutdowns, accounting for 28% of global cases.
- Myanmar experienced the most shutdowns (85), with some imposed by external countries and armed groups.

## Shutdowns in Indian States

- Internet shutdowns affected 16 states and union territories in India.

## Daily News Analysis

- The highest number of shutdowns occurred in Manipur (21), Haryana (12), and Jammu & Kashmir (12).
- Out of 84 shutdowns, 41 were linked to protests, and 23 to communal violence.



- Space travel affects astronauts' health due to microgravity, radiation exposure, and psychological challenges.

### Challenges of Space Travel

- The human body is not designed for space travel, where microgravity and radiation exposure cause various health issues.
- Astronauts face physical and psychological challenges, especially on long-duration missions.
- More research is needed to develop protective measures and personalized health strategies.

### Radiation Exposure Risks

- Earth's atmosphere and magnetic field shield humans from space radiation, but astronauts lack this protection in space.
- High-energy radiation exposure can damage DNA, increase cancer risk, and affect the immune system.
- Neurodegenerative effects may occur due to prolonged exposure.
- Low-Earth orbit missions provide some protection, but deep-space missions, like those to the moon, involve higher radiation doses.

### Effects of Microgravity

- Gravity regulates many body functions, and its absence causes fluid shifts, leading to increased intracranial pressure and vision problems.
- Muscles weaken, bones lose density, and the cardiovascular system struggles to regulate blood pressure.
- The inner ear loses its ability to sense movement, causing balance and coordination issues.

### Psychological Effects

- Living in coned spaces with limited social interaction can lead to stress, sleep problems, and mood disorders.



Long-duration missions require astronauts to live in confined and isolated environments. REUTERS

### *How does space travel affect health of an astronaut?*

**Reuters**

The human body was not built for spaceflight, with its microgravity conditions, exposure to high-energy radiation, and other issues. As a result, trekking beyond the earth's confines causes many physiological changes that affect an astronaut's health.

Space travel exposes people to an environment different from the earth's, posing a range of physiological and psychological challenges, especially with prolonged exposure, according to Afshin Beheshti, director of the Centre for Space Biomedicine at the University of Pittsburgh.

As researchers seek new countermeasures to protect space travellers, more data is needed on astronauts with varying health backgrounds and undertaking different kinds of missions in order to map out personalised risk profiles and mitigation

**Space travel exposes people to a different environment, posing physiological and psychological challenges, especially with prolonged exposure**

strategies, Chris Mason, a professor of physiology and biophysics at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York, said.

Unlike on the earth, where the atmosphere and planetary magnetic field provide a shield from space radiation, astronauts are exposed to high-energy radiation permeating the cosmos. This can lead to DNA damage, increased cancer risk, neurodegenerative effects and immune system dysregulation.

The earth's magnetosphere provides some protection for astronauts in missions in low-earth orbit. But astronauts traveling beyond that, such as on missions to the moon, would experience much higher radiation doses.

Gravity plays a critical role in regulating bodily functions. Without gravity, bodily fluids shift upward, increasing intracranial pressure that can affect vision. The lack of mechanical loading on bones and muscles associated also leads to bone density loss and muscle atrophy. The cardiovascular system also changes, struggling to regulate blood pressure upon return. Prolonged exposure to microgravity conditions also affects the inner ear's ability to sense movement and orientation, leading to balance and coordination issues.

Long-duration space missions require astronauts to live in confined and isolated environments with limited social interaction and exposure to natural stimuli. This, Beheshti said, can lead to psychological stress, sleep disturbances, and mood disorders.

How astronauts recover after returning to the earth depends mostly on mission duration. For short-duration missions of a few days in low-earth orbit, about 95% of biological damage sustained appears to be reversed.

For astronauts who spend months aboard the International Space Station, recovery appears proportional to their time in space. Many physiological systems gradually return to normal. But some issues persist. For example, spaceflight-associated neuro-ocular syndrome has been linked to impaired vision due to microgravity-induced fluid shifts and changes in intracranial pressure affecting the eyes.

## Post-Spaceflight Recovery

- ▶ Short missions see 95% biological recovery, but longer missions require extended rehabilitation.
- ▶ Some health issues, such as vision impairment, may persist after returning to Earth.



Scientists are exploring whether gravity follows quantum mechanics by designing experiments to test its superposition and entanglement.

➔ If proven, this could help unify gravity with other fundamental forces.

## Scientists propose tabletop test to check quantumness of gravity

Unlike Newtonian mechanics, where measuring a system doesn't alter it, quantum mechanics dictates that observing a system forces it into a definite state; this difference creates a way to test whether the system is behaving according to the laws of Newtonian or quantum mechanics

Debdutta Paul  
BENGALURU

**G**eneral relativity and quantum mechanics are two highly successful theories. The former explains gravity and the latter teams up with special relativity to describe the other three forces of nature: electromagnetic, strong nuclear, and weak nuclear forces.

However, scientists don't know how gravity fits into quantum mechanics. In fact, they have been proposing experiments that can test the quantumness of gravity. On October 29, 2024, one such proposal appeared in the journal *Physical Review Letters*.

With concepts like superposition, illustrated by the Schrödinger's cat thought experiment, and entanglement, quantum mechanics defies classical intuition. Quantum mechanics also allows seemingly absurd phenomena, e.g. the measurement of a quantum system (like a particle) can cause the system to instantaneously 'collapse' into one possible state that described the system before the measurement.

In fact, if a system undergoes measurement-induced collapse, it's said to live by the rules of quantum mechanics. Classical systems like planets orbiting stars, cricket balls flying in the air, and cars on the road don't do this.

### Ruling out alternatives

Multiple experiments have found that both quantum mechanics and general relativity are legitimate theories of nature — yet they remain incompatible with each other. This has encouraged physicists to try and come up with a larger theory that can accommodate both. One strong contender is string theory, another is loop quantum gravity. Both of them predict deviations from quantum mechanics and general relativity either at the beginning of the universe or inside black holes, meaning they're nearly impossible to test.

"So far, experimental tests are extremely difficult — the situation looks very bleak — it is not clear if it can be done at all," Dipankar Home of Bose Institute, Kolkata, and one of the authors of the new paper, said.

To check whether gravity is quantum mechanical, scientists need precise tests that rule out alternative possibilities.

Unlike the classical Newtonian mechanics, where measuring a system doesn't alter it, quantum mechanics dictates that observing a system forces it into a definite state. This isn't a matter of how carefully a physicist is making the measurement. The measurement will always collapse the state. So measuring the state versus not measuring it creates a way to test whether the system is behaving according to the laws of Newtonian mechanics or quantum mechanics.

As a first step, physicists said they needed an experiment where gravity helps an inherently quantum mechanical process happen. If gravity causes the state to collapse, it will be a sign that gravity behaves quantum mechanically.

The new study suggested the following design: a test mass is in a superposition of two possible paths it can take. A probe mass will interact with it gravitationally to force it to choose one of the paths. Here, both masses are in a superposition of which paths they take. These two paths



If a system undergoes measurement-induced collapse, it is said to live by the rules of quantum mechanics. Classical systems like falling apples or planets orbiting stars don't do this. Representative image. unsplash

come close, resulting in different distances between the two pairs of paths. That is, for each path of the test mass, there are two possible paths the probe mass can take.

"Such simple, yet novel proposals ... are very interesting to the community," said Sreenath K. Manikandan, a theoretical physicist at the Nordic Institute for Theoretical Physics, Sweden, who wasn't involved in the study.

### Testing weak gravity

The idea is also interesting because it proposes to test weak gravity. Say you're performing an experiment where you're looking for light. If the light is bright, you can find it just by looking at it. But if it is very dim, you need sophisticated light-detecting cameras. Similarly, ideas to look for quantum gravity have so far involved strong gravity, like that near black holes, whereas the new test proposes looking for weak gravity, like the force near a small object.

"Our contention is that fundamental quantum gravity features can persist in this limit," Home said.

Igor Pikovski, a quantum gravity researcher at the Stevens Institute of Technology and Stockholm University, commended this: "The important lesson is that quantum gravity signatures might show themselves even ... in tabletop set-ups and not just in science-fiction scenarios."

But independent experts said the experiment is still challenging because the masses need to behave quantum mechanically.

Quantum properties usually show up in a measurable way in systems that exist at a smaller than microscopic scale, like inside atoms, whereas gravity is easier to

**Experiments have found both quantum mechanics and general relativity are legitimate theories, yet they remain incompatible with each other, encouraging physicists to search for a larger theory to accommodate both**

measure around larger objects, like a building. This is why Vivek Sudhir of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology said, "Preparing a spatial quantum superposition of an object massive enough such that its gravitational force is also measurable is an enormous experimental challenge."

### Creating a superposition

Bose et al. have proposed the use of masses weighing about one-trillionth of a gram while maintaining a separation of around one-tenth of a millimetre. Nanocrystals meet these criteria.

Yet the team still estimates a decade for their experiment to be conducted. Thus far, "the largest objects that have been placed in two places at once are macromolecules. We will have to place a nanocrystal, which is a billion times larger, in two places at once," Sougato Bose, one of the coauthors of the study, said.

"Creating this superposition is by far the main challenge," Debarshi Das, another coauthor, added.

To do so, the authors have proposed using a quantum property of the nanocrystals called spin. Simply speaking, the spin affects the nanocrystals' motion (and can be manipulated by an external magnetic field). The spin of each nanocrystal exists in a superposition of

two states until it is measured. Since the state affects the nanocrystal's path, it also exists in a superposition of two paths until a measurement.

"Once prepared in such a state, the gravitational field produced by this configuration will need to be measured very rapidly," according to Sudhir. "This is because any spatial quantum superposition will be extremely fragile and will die quickly, [so] measurements have to be made before this happens."

Bose also said the nanocrystals can collide with gas atoms and other objects and forces in their environment, which could destroy the superposition. "This could include things like the gravitational forces from seismic activity in the earth or perhaps even those due to clouds moving in the sky," Sudhir said.

For these reasons, the experimental set-up will have to happen in a near-perfect vacuum and the masses' properties will have to be measured with extreme efficiency.

Despite all these challenges, physicists are hopeful. The proposed test has a much shorter timeline than the centuries required for humankind to develop the technologies to test quantum gravity near black holes.

Pikovski agreed the future is bright: "Just a few years ago, it was considered impossible to experimentally test quantum gravity even in principle."

The experts also said that the test may reveal gravity isn't a classical force, and that overall they will have to keep an open mind: it may not necessarily mean gravity is quantum but that it could be a non-classical and non-quantum entity, something different altogether. (Debdutta Paul is a freelance science journalist. [dbdtp@gmail.com](mailto:dbdtp@gmail.com))



### **Conflict Between General Relativity and Quantum Mechanics**

- General relativity explains gravity, while quantum mechanics explains the other three fundamental forces.
- Scientists do not yet know how gravity fits into quantum mechanics.
- There is a need for experiments to test whether gravity behaves according to quantum rules.

### **Concepts of Quantum Mechanics**

- Quantum mechanics includes principles like superposition and entanglement, which defy classical physics.
- A quantum system collapses into a definite state when measured, unlike classical systems.
- If gravity follows quantum rules, measuring it should collapse its state.

### **Quantum Nature of Gravity**

- Gravity may follow the rules of quantum mechanics. This means it could act like tiny particles instead of a smooth force.
- In quantum mechanics, particles can exist in two states at once. This is called superposition.
- If gravity is quantum, it should also show superposition and entanglement. This means two objects could be linked, no matter how far apart they are.
- Scientists want to test if gravity behaves like this.
- If true, it could help unify physics. It would connect gravity with other forces in nature.

### **Proposed Experiment to Test Quantum Gravity**

- Scientists suggest an experiment using a test mass in superposition of two paths.
- A probe mass will interact with it gravitationally, forcing it into one path.
- If gravity causes this collapse, it may indicate that gravity is quantum in nature.

### **Testing Weak Gravity**

- This experiment aims to test weak gravity effects, making it more feasible.
- If successful, quantum gravity effects could be observed in tabletop experiments.

### **Challenges and Future Prospects**

- The experiment requires placing a nanocrystal, one-trillionth of a gram, in superposition.
- The set-up must be in a near-perfect vacuum to prevent interference.

➔ Despite challenges, scientists believe testing quantum gravity is now possible within a decade.

**Page 11 : GS 2 : Governance**

- ➔ The rise of digital platforms has led to surveillance capitalism, where personal data is extracted and monetized.
- ➔ This raises concerns over privacy, autonomy, and corporate control.

## Surveillance capitalism: the power to control personal data

A look at how surveillance capitalism relies on the commodification of personal data; its impact on privacy and autonomy; and its deep ties to state surveillance

Rebecca Rose Varghese

**A** was chatting with B and C in a social media group about an upcoming wedding she was attending. She casually mentioned needing a new dress and some accessories. Later that evening, as she scrolled through her social media feed, she was bombarded with advertisements for dresses, shoes, and jewellery — precisely like the ones she had described. Have you ever experienced this? And if you have, do you wonder how and why this happens, and whether your private conversations can be accessed by some other entity?

In simple terms, this is exactly what happens under surveillance capitalism. Surveillance capitalism is an economic system in which personal data is collected, analysed, and sold by tech conglomerates to predict and manipulate human behaviour. This system is so integral to the digital economy that it has reshaped capitalism itself, as American author and professor Shoshana Zuboff argues in her 2018 book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. She describes surveillance capitalism as a new economic order that expropriates human experience for data-driven profit, and compares it to earlier exploitative systems like colonialism and industrial capitalism.

**The concept**  
Unlike traditional capitalism, which revolves around goods and services, surveillance capitalism extracts human experience as raw material to mine data, predict behaviour, and influence decisions. This data is sold to advertisers, political campaigns, and other entities. Companies like Google, Meta, and Amazon have turned the internet into a vast surveillance machine, tracking and monetising every click, search, purchase, and in some cases even offline movements.

Zuboff describes the power from extensive data collection as instrumental power — control that does not rely on coercion but which subtly shapes behaviour. This is achieved through predictive analytics, recommendation algorithms, and targeted content, nudging individuals towards actions that benefit corporations. Alex Pentland's concept of social physics further illustrates how analysing vast datasets of human interactions reveals patterns, allowing corporations and policymakers to model, predict, and influence collective behaviour. This makes individuals more predictable economic actors, reinforcing surveillance capitalism's role in shaping consumer choices and social trends while prioritising profit over autonomy.

**Different from past forms**  
Surveillance capitalism differs fundamentally from industrial capitalism. While industrial capitalism relies on labour and material production, surveillance capitalism profits from behavioural data extraction. Instead of tangible goods, companies commodify human experience, making users both consumers and raw material for



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data-driven predictions.

Under industrial capitalism, companies focus on efficiency, productivity, and the exploitation and control of labour in manufacturing. Surveillance capitalism, however, is about controlling behaviour. Algorithms keep users engaged and guide them toward choices that benefit tech giants. This system prioritises data collection over autonomy, making every interaction a chance for monetisation.

One of the most concerning aspects of surveillance capitalism is its entanglement with state surveillance. Governments increasingly rely on private tech companies for intelligence gathering, policing, and social control. Instead of developing independent surveillance infrastructures, states now have access to

vast amounts of privately collected data, which they can obtain through legal means such as data-sharing agreements or extra-legal methods. The collaboration between corporations and states creates a system where the private sector's profit motives and public security interests align, at the expense of individual privacy and civil liberties. This reduces democratic accountability, as much of this surveillance happens within private corporations, beyond public scrutiny. Policies that favour deregulation and corporate autonomy allow this model to persist with minimal oversight, reinforcing a structure where both states and corporations benefit from mass surveillance while individuals face increasing risks of data exploitation and

loss of autonomy.

**Eroding autonomy**

Surveillance capitalism's reliance on extensive data collection has created a fragile and interconnected digital network. The sheer volume of data flowing through corporate and state surveillance systems mean that disruptions in one area can lead to cascading failures across multiple sectors. This systemic fragility becomes evident during major data breaches and algorithmic failures, which have led to real-world consequences such as financial instability and misinformation crises.

A notable example is the Cambridge Analytica scandal, where vast amounts of Facebook user data were harvested without consent in 2014, and used to build a system that could target voters in the U.S. with personalised political advertisements. This demonstrated how personal data, when exploited, can influence democratic processes, reinforcing concerns over the unchecked power of surveillance capitalism.

The pervasive data monitoring and predictive analytics employed by corporations further erode personal autonomy. Every action online is recorded, analysed, and used to refine behavioural predictions. Over time, users are subtly conditioned by algorithmic content, influencing their preferences and decisions in ways that serve the interests of advertisers and tech corporations rather than their own. While this seems harmless, it slowly erodes autonomy, allowing those in power to shape individual thinking for their benefit.

**Challenges in regulation**

Despite growing awareness of the dangers of surveillance capitalism, regulatory frameworks struggle to keep pace with technological advancements. Laws such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA) attempt to give users more control over their data. However, these regulations fail to address the core issue — the commodification of personal information. This is largely because existing legal frameworks are designed to manage data privacy within traditional capitalist models rather than protect individuals from the structural impact of surveillance capitalism.

Moreover, corporate lobbying and political interests, particularly those in power, bungle these efforts as surveillance capitalism is highly beneficial for them. The rise of tech leaders as politicians is also an example of the interplay between surveillance capitalism and the surveillance state. When tech giants gain increasing influence over policymaking, they ensure that regulations remain favourable to their business interests. This dynamic makes it difficult to implement meaningful restrictions on data collection and behavioural manipulation. The blurred lines between political authority and corporate power reinforce the dominance of surveillance capitalism, limiting accountability and individual autonomy.

The concept of surveillance capitalism is crucial as our lives become increasingly entangled with technology. It serves as a warning of the potential dangers if we are not cautious and if states fail to implement proper regulations and restrictions on what private companies can access and use. This is an academic concept that must be widely discussed to bring about meaningful policy changes. Recognising its impact enables individuals to critically engage with digital platforms and demand stronger protections for their privacy and autonomy.

Rebecca Rose Varghese is a freelance journalist.

### Understanding Surveillance Capitalism

- Surveillance capitalism is an economic system where companies collect, analyze, and sell personal data to predict and influence human behavior.
- Social media platforms and tech companies track online activities and use the data for targeted advertisements and content recommendations.
- This system has reshaped capitalism by making human experience a source of profit.
- Unlike traditional capitalism, which focuses on goods and services, surveillance capitalism extracts behavioral data to drive profit.
- Companies use this data to create detailed user profiles and sell them to advertisers, political campaigns, and businesses.

### Instrumentarian Power and Behavior Control

- Surveillance capitalism does not rely on force but uses predictive analytics and recommendation algorithms to influence behavior.
- Personalized advertisements, news feeds, and video suggestions guide users toward certain actions, often without them realizing it.
- This level of control makes people more predictable economic actors, benefiting corporations at the cost of individual autonomy.

### Comparison with Industrial Capitalism

- Industrial capitalism focused on material goods and labor, while surveillance capitalism profits from human experience and online activity.
- In industrial capitalism, efficiency and productivity were key, but surveillance capitalism aims to control user engagement for maximum profit.
- Algorithms are designed to keep users online longer, increasing data collection and advertising revenue.

### Involvement of Governments

- Governments collaborate with tech companies to access personal data for security and intelligence purposes.
- Instead of creating independent surveillance networks, authorities obtain data from private companies through legal and extra-legal means.

- This partnership raises concerns about privacy, as corporate and state interests align, reducing public accountability.

### Threats to Personal Freedom

- Surveillance capitalism weakens personal autonomy by conditioning people's preferences and choices through algorithmic manipulation.
- Constant monitoring and data collection influence decision-making in subtle ways, often prioritizing corporate interests over individual freedom.
- The 2014 misuse of social media data for political advertising revealed how personal data can be exploited to shape democratic outcomes.

### Regulatory Challenges

- Laws like the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA) aim to enhance data privacy.
- However, these regulations do not stop the core practice of turning personal information into a commodity.
- Tech companies and political leaders often resist stronger regulations, as surveillance capitalism benefits them financially and politically.

### Need for Awareness and Policy Changes

- As technology becomes more integrated into daily life, the risks of surveillance capitalism must be addressed.
- Stronger laws and better oversight are needed to protect privacy and prevent excessive corporate control.

### UPSC Mains Practice Question

**Ques** :Discuss the concept of surveillance capitalism and its implications for privacy, democracy, and individual autonomy. Suggest measures to regulate this evolving economic model. (250 Words /15 marks)

# The RTI is now the 'right to deny information'

**T**he introduction of the Right to Information (RTI) Act was a move that generated great hope among citizens since it recognised them to be the rulers of the nation. It empowered them to seek information from the government, with dignity and respect. It looked as if the 'swaraj' that they had missed would be delivered to them. The Act codified their fundamental right to information and was one of the best transparency laws in the world. It appeared that it would curb corruption and arbitrariness, with citizens being the vigilance monitors of their government. But, it must be conceded, it has fallen far short of our expectations and the state of our democracy is not better.

Within a few months, the government realised that this was a transfer of power from public servants to the citizens. In less than a year it moved to amend the law which would have weakened the RTI Act. But there were widespread protests by citizens across the nation. Sensing the mood of the nation, the government dropped the amendments.

### A gradual erosion

The RTI Act had created Information Commissions as the final appellate authorities to implement the law. Most of the posts of 'information commissioner' were taken up by retired bureaucrats. After working for decades as senior bureaucrats, it was difficult for them to hand over power to citizens and recognise that they were the rightful owners of the government. No attempt was made to select people with a record in transparency. Many of them looked at these jobs as post-retirement sinecures and worked only for a few hours. While the national average of the disposal of cases by High Court judges is over 2,500 in a year, the national average of disposal of cases by the commissioners was less than this. Given the fact that the complexity of cases before commissions is far less than the cases before the High Courts, each commissioner should have been clearing at least over 5,000 cases in a year. While the law mandated a period of 30 days for the information to be provided and the same period for the first appellate authorities, it did not specify any time limit for the commissioners. Many commissions began to have pendency of over a year. The right to information was being converted into a right to history. Many ordinary citizens could not pursue the issue of what was now a denial of information. The penal provisions of the RTI Act were the teeth of the Act, but most information commissioners were reluctant to use them. The governments delayed appointing commissioners, which only increased the backlogs.

The clear message of various High Court



**Shailesh Gandhi**

is a former Central Information Commissioner

Citizens and the media must take up the responsibility to ensure that the original RTI Act is followed and not allow any distortions

judgments was that the exemptions listed under Section 8 of the RTI Act were restrictions on a citizen's fundamental right and had to be construed strictly as in the law. Parliament intended most information to be provided and crafted the exemptions carefully.

The entire approach to a citizen's right to information changed in August 2011 when the Supreme Court of India held in *Central Board of Secondary Education & Anr. vs Aditya Bandopadhyay & Ors.*, in paragraph 33: "Some High Courts have held that section 8 of RTI Act is in the nature of an exception to section 3 which empowers the citizens with the right to information, which is a derivative from the freedom of speech; and that therefore section 8 should be construed strictly, literally and narrowly. This may not be the correct approach."

In paragraph 37 it made a comment without any evidence: "Indiscriminate and impractical demands or directions under RTI Act for disclosure of all and sundry information (unrelated to transparency and accountability in the functioning of public authorities and eradication of corruption) would be counterproductive as it will adversely affect the efficiency of the administration and result in the executive getting bogged down with the non-productive work of collecting and furnishing information. The Act should not be allowed to be misused or abused, to become a tool to obstruct the national development and integration, or to destroy the peace, tranquility and harmony among its citizens. Nor should it be converted into a tool of oppression or intimidation of honest officials striving to do their duty."

This justified treating RTI as an undesirable activity and labelling RTI users as outcasts. It justified not giving information and attacks on RTI users.

### The subject of 'personal information'

The second major blow came with the judgment in *Girish Ramchandra Deshpande vs Cen. Information Commr. & Ors.*, in October 2012.

A RTI applicant, Girish Ramchandra Deshpande, had sought copies of all memos, show cause notices and censure/punishment awarded to a public servant. A.B. Lute. He had also sought other details such as his movable and immovable properties and details of his investments, lending and borrowing from banks and other financial institutions.

This was denied claiming exemption under Section 8(1)(j). This section exempts "information which relates to personal information the disclosure of which has no relationship to any public activity or interest, or which would cause unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual unless the Central Public Information

Officer ... is satisfied that the larger public interest justifies the disclosure of such information: Provided that the information, which cannot be denied to the Parliament or a State Legislature shall not be denied to any person."

A simple reading shows that under this clause, 'personal' can be denied if it has apparently no relationship to any public activity or interest; or the disclosure of the said information would cause unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual.

The Court did not rule on whether the information was an outcome of a public activity or if its disclosure would amount to an unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual. It denied the information by reading only the first seven words of the provision and saying it was 'personal information'. Most information can be linked to some person. Realising that it may be difficult for public information officers and other appellate authorities to decide on what constitutes privacy, Parliament gave a simple test in the proviso – that information which would not be denied to Parliament or legislature would not be denied to any person. This can only have one meaning. That anyone claiming that information would be denied to the citizen would make a subjective statement that he would deny the information to Parliament.

It is well settled that literal interpretation should be given to a statute if the same does not lead to absurdity. In *Nasiruddin and others vs Sita Ram Agarwal* (2003) 2 SCC 577, the Court has stated: "37. The court's jurisdiction to interpret a statute can be invoked when the same is ambiguous... It cannot re-write or recast legislation. It is also necessary to determine that there exists a presumption that the legislature has not used any superfluous words. It is well settled that the real intention of the legislation must be gathered from the language used."

*Girish Ramchandra Deshpande* amends the RTI Act and has been used as a precedent in six subsequent Court judgments and has become the gold standard to convert RTI into an RDI, or Right to Deny Information. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act takes a cue from this and amends the RTI Act itself. There are other cases in which words in the law have not been accorded their usual meanings.

### A call to citizens

To ensure that the RTI fulfils its original promise we should go by the original Act and not allow any distortions. Citizens and the media must take up the responsibility to discuss and defend it. Otherwise, we will have a dilution of our fundamental right under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India.

**GS Paper 02 Governance**

**UPSC Mains Practice Question:** Discuss the challenges faced by the Right to Information (RTI) Act in ensuring government transparency. (250 Words /15 marks)

## Context :

- The RTI Act's effectiveness is declining due to bureaucratic resistance, judicial rulings, and legislative amendments.

## Introduction and Initial Hope

- The introduction of the RTI Act created hope among citizens by recognizing their right to access government information.
- It was considered one of the best transparency laws in the world, aiming to curb corruption and arbitrariness.
- Citizens were expected to act as vigilance monitors over government actions.
- However, over time, the implementation of the Act has not met public expectations, and democratic accountability has not significantly improved.

## Early Resistance from the Government

- The government quickly realized that the RTI Act shifted power from public servants to citizens. Within a year, attempts were made to amend the Act in ways that would weaken it. Widespread public protests led to the withdrawal of these amendments.

## Erosion of the RTI Mechanism

- Information Commissions were established as the final appellate authorities for RTI implementation.
- Most commissioner positions were filled by retired bureaucrats who were reluctant to empower citizens.
- The selection process did not prioritize individuals with expertise in transparency and governance.
- Many commissioners viewed their roles as post-retirement benefits and worked with limited commitment.

## Delays and Inefficiency in RTI Processing

- High Court judges dispose of over 2,500 cases per year, but RTI commissioners clear far fewer cases.
- Given the simpler nature of RTI cases, each commissioner should ideally handle over 5,000 cases annually.
- The law mandates a 30-day response period for government departments, but no deadline exists for Information Commissions.
- This has led to a backlog, often delaying responses for over a year, making information irrelevant by the time it is received.
- Citizens often struggle to continue pursuing delayed cases, weakening the Act's effectiveness.

### **Weak Enforcement of RTI Penal Provisions**

- The RTI Act includes provisions for penalizing officers who deny information.
- Many commissioners hesitate to impose penalties, leading to a lack of accountability.
- Governments further weaken the system by delaying the appointment of new commissioners, increasing case backlogs.

### **Judicial Interpretations and Their Impact**

- Courts have ruled that the exemptions under Section 8 of the RTI Act should not be interpreted strictly.
- In a key judgment, the Supreme Court emphasized that indiscriminate RTI requests could hinder administration and national development.
- This ruling led to a perception that RTI usage is problematic, discouraging officials from responding to requests.

### **Impact of Personal Information Clause**

- Another major ruling restricted access to personal information of public officials.
- An RTI applicant had sought details about actions taken against a public servant, but the request was denied under the personal information exemption.
- The court did not examine whether the information was related to public activity or if disclosure was in public interest.
- This ruling ignored a key provision stating that information accessible to Parliament should also be accessible to the public.
- As a result, this decision has been used as a precedent in multiple cases to deny information.

### **Concerns Over Legislative Changes**

## Daily News Analysis

- The Digital Personal Data Protection Act has further weakened the RTI Act by restricting access to information.
- The trend of judicial and legislative changes is shifting RTI towards becoming a Right to Deny Information (RDI).

### Conclusion

- To preserve the RTI Act's original purpose, citizens and the media must actively defend it. Without public vigilance, fundamental rights under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution may be diluted.
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