

DID INDIA'S PORN BAN REDUCE TRAFFIC TO POPULAR ADULT SITES LIKE PORNHUB?

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Indian anti-porn campaigners and legal authorities have linked consumption of pornography to sexual assault cases [File] | Photo Credit: AP

The regulation of pornography in India confuses not just its viewers but also researchers, digital rights advocates, policymakers, campaigners, and the Indian internet service providers (ISPs) responsible for controlling access to such platforms with explicit content.

The lack of clarity is because the Indian government has not enforced just one porn ban, but several blocks – and retractions of those blocks – to tackle sexual violence in the country.

Adding to this muddle, website blocks are often not flagged by ISPs. Connecting to a blocked porn site usually results in a failed connection which resembles an internet outage rather than a government-ordered block. The user rarely gets a banner or an information box providing the details of the site block and its legal basis.

What a user sees when accessing a blocked adult site from India | Photo Credit: The Hindu

But did India's multiple porn blocks actually reduce the country's traffic to porn platforms?

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From a legal perspective, an Indian citizen in a private space who watches explicit videos featuring [fully consensual interactions between adult actors is not committing a crime](#).

However, if that same individual were to create explicit content, share it with others, profit from it, become involved in the production of non-consensual content, or involve children in such media, they would be violating Section 292 in The Indian Penal Code and/or sections of The Information Technology (IT) Act of 2000. Child abuse material also comes under the scope of The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO), 2012.

Both anti-porn campaigners and Indian legal authorities have linked watching pornography to sexual assault cases within the country such as the 2012 Delhi gangrape and murder of a physiotherapy student, and the 2018 gangrape of a student in a school hostel in Dehradun.

Indian authorities have also justified porn bans to protect children and their mental health. Over the years, blocklists with the names of hundreds of porn websites have been shared with Indian ISPs, with instructions to block all of them or at least those with child abuse material. At times, [orders were later issued to unblock specific sites](#) whose content was deemed acceptable.

ISPs such as [Reliance Jio and Act Broadband have opted for widespread blocks](#) and even major websites such as Pornhub are still unavailable to many Indian residents today - unless they use a Virtual Private Network (VPN) or a privacy browser.

But have these blocks by courts, government departments, and ISPs truly led to a fall in India's traffic to widely visited porn websites?

Recording more than 36 billion visits every year, the adult content site Pornhub is a gold mine of data for those trying to understand the habits of pornography viewers.

Pornhub knows this well and releases yearly insight reports revealing internet traffic data for its top 20 countries, popular searches made by users, their demographic information, time spent on the platform, and other annual trends. The site was hit by India's bans in both 2015 and 2018. [The 2015 ban was later reversed.](#)

In a statement in October 2018, Corey Price, Pornhub's Vice President, criticised India's ban of 827 websites (out of the original 857 proposed), saying a Pornhub mirror site with a slightly different URL would be made available for Indian viewers to watch adult content without being censored.

"It's evident that the Indian government does not have a solution to a very serious and systemic problem in the country, and is using adult sites like ours as a scapegoat," said Price, adding that Pornhub had been blocked but not "thousands of risky porn sites that may contain illegal content."

Price also noted that India's people were "one of the largest connoisseurs of adult content."

But revenge porn, as well as videos of rape and child sexual abuse have been uploaded to Pornhub over the years and taken down after delays. Pornhub also defended videos with titles indicating that the recorded individual was a teenager being abused while unconscious. In a statement to BBC in 2020, Pornhub called these videos "fantasies" and said they were protected under free speech.

Pornhub's holding company MindGeek in late August changed its name to Aylo, highlighting "the need for a fresh start and a renewed commitment to innovation, diverse and inclusive adult content, and trust and safety."

Internet traffic to Pornhub from India was consistently high and has put the country among the top 20 for the past several years.

India's traffic to Pornhub was among the world's highest, but fell sharply from 2019 | Photo Credit: Compiled by The Hindu on Canva; Data sourced from Pornhub insights

In 2014, before the porn ban came into effect, the country's internet traffic to Pornhub made it the fourth biggest visitor. The 2015 porn ban was enforced and then reversed, though some ISPs continued to block Pornhub. But that year, India moved up a spot to Pornhub's top three in terms of country traffic. In 2016 it fell to fourth place again, but regained its third-place position in 2017 and held it in 2018.

Pornhub noted in its 2018 insights report that India had the largest proportion of millennial visitors. These users were about 29 years old on average and made up more than 80% of the country's traffic, as per the report.

After the 2018 porn ban kicked in, Pornhub lost some traffic from India, but the country was still among the top 20. Pornhub's Year in Review report for 2020 was not available. However, in 2021 and 2022, as India battled deadly waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, the country fell off the top 20 list completely.

The Hindu reached out to Pornhub to gather more data about the impact of India's internet porn ban, but did not receive a response.

While India's traffic to Pornhub has declined since 2019, other platforms with sexual content are yet to be formally regulated by the Indian government. Some examples include pornographic text on websites intended for this purpose, adult videos on digital content subscription services such as OnlyFans, explicit clips on Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), pornographic audio clips, and graphically sexual content on OTT platforms. Pornhub's most well-known URL is still blocked by Indian ISPs, but *The Hindu* found that the same platform was still open to Indian visitors under a tweaked URL.

Apart from these sources, far less regulated pornography websites and/or platforms with illegal sexual content continue to operate and be accessible to internet users across the country.

The Indian government is also yet to formally outline the steps it is taking to crack down on [pornography or deepfakes created with generative AI tools](#).

Pornhub's 'Year in Review' report for 2023, expected near the end of this year, could shed light on whether things have changed or if the country's downtrend is here to stay.

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