

# Facebook fights back in row over its free internet for India's poor

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The green light on Pushpa Kaushik's modem hasn't come on for the past three months. When she first got internet access in her home a year ago, all the people of Lalpur, a small village in Uttar Pradesh, northern India, used to come to her house to use her computer. Some needed to check their bank accounts, others wanted to learn English, and some even wanted to look for solutions to their medical problems.

Village girls studying at the local university used to come to her house to look for reading material online. Now that Kaushik's green light has gone dark, they have to walk an hour to the nearest town just to pick up a book.

The people of the village are part of India's unconnected billion, who struggle to access the internet from rural parts of the country. In the past week, more than 2.4 million Indians have written to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India as a row escalated over Facebook's Free Basics initiative. This claims to spread "digital equality" to people like the villagers of Lalpur by giving them free access to a handful of websites, with no subscription fees or data charges.

The initiative is part of Facebook's plan to bring free internet access to developing parts of world and has been piloted in countries including Nigeria, Gabon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In India, freely accessible websites include the search engine bing.com, some news websites and Facebook.

The regulator will give its decision on whether Facebook's Free Basics plan will be allowed in India at the end of January. The service was temporarily shut down last year in response to protests. Critics argued that Facebook's plan was jeopardising "net neutrality" by giving the company unparalleled control over which websites and content were freely accessible to users in India.

Net neutrality means internet service providers should treat all websites and all online services the same. In recent months, the issue has divided opinion across the world. Egypt has already shut down Free Basics, while a row on a similar but unrelated issue in the US led to a Federal Communications Commission ruling against service providers such as AT&T and Comcast, who argued that they should be able to distribute bandwidth differently for different services, meaning they could charge a premium or slow down traffic speeds for high-bandwidth services such as Netflix.

As the public consultation in India was drawing to a close, Facebook started an email campaign asking its users to "Save Free Basics". The campaign, backed by full-page advertisements in national newspapers, urged Indians to submit a pre-prepared form saying they were in favour of Free Basics to the telecoms regulator.

In an editorial in the Times of India, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's co-founder, argued that free internet access was a basic human right. Zuckerberg argued that internet access could help to lift people out of poverty, asking readers: "Who could possibly be against this?"

Mahesh Murthy, a venture capitalist and a campaigner with the volunteer group *Save the Internet*, (...) said: "The Facebook plan falsely presents itself as the only option for India, that is to give a tiny part of the internet to some people."

*Save the Internet* says that Facebook will offer micro-network access that will only benefit the company itself and the websites that it chooses to put online for free. Murthy added: "Facebook claims to want to empower India's poor. Instead, Facebook wants to build its little ghetto of poor people on the poor internet and own access to them through its servers and targeting databases."

(616 words)