

# Facebook in India row over Internet access for the poor

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A woman in Mumbai, India, watches a movie on a smartphone as companies compete for a share of the fast-growing Internet market

Facebook went on the offensive Wednesday in an escalating row with Indian authorities over a controversial initiative which the social network says is aimed at widening online access in the developing world.

The social media giant took out billboards and full-page newspaper

advertises and sent SMSs to defend its Free Basics service, which offers people without the Internet free access to a handful of websites through mobile phones.

Free Basics is "at risk of being banned" in India, Facebook said in the adverts, adding that the service aims to help a billion unconnected Indians—mostly living in poor rural areas—to get online.

It follows fierce criticism from net neutrality activists who say it violates the principle that the whole Internet should be available to all, unrestricted by any one company.

Earlier this month the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India ordered Reliance Communications, the sole mobile operator for the service, to suspend it temporarily without giving a reason, documents seen by AFP show.

"This campaign gives people the opportunity to support digital equality in India," Facebook said in a statement on its Save Free Basics campaign.

"We are committed to Free Basics and to working with Reliance and the relevant authorities to help people in India get connected."

Some 3.2 million people have petitioned India's telecoms regulator not to ban Free Basics, formerly named Internet.org, which launched nationwide last month after being trialled in several states, Facebook said.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (L) hugs Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg after a meeting in California on September 27, 2015

The Silicon Valley giant has asked supporters to leave a missed call at a designated number that automatically sends a message to the regulator in support of the service.

Several prominent Indian entrepreneurs and members of the tech community have also spoken out against Free Basics, arguing that even

for poor citizens, no Internet is better than a hand-picked and corporate-controlled web offering.

"Oh my fellow Indians, either choose this & do a jihaad for independent Internet later or pick today," tweeted Vijay Shekhar Sharma, the founder of PAYTM, an e-commerce site.

India is a key territory for Facebook with 130 million users, making it the social network's biggest market outside the United States.

"It goes about a modern twist to what essentially used to be the white man's burden—that India's poor need Facebook's FreeBasics to free them," Amod Malviya, the former chief technology officer for Indian shopping website Flipkart, wrote in a blog post.

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