

TikTok, Other Chinese Apps Banned: RSTV- Big Picture

Anchor: Frank Rausan Pereira

Guests: Ashok Sajjanhar, Former Ambassador; Praval Singh, Vice President, Marketing, Zoho Corp; Khushbu Jain, Cyber Law Expert

What's in the news?

- The Indian Government has banned 59 apps with Chinese links, including the hugely popular TikTok and UC Browser, for engaging in "activities which are prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order".
- Announcing its decision to ban 59 apps, the Information Technology Ministry said the move will "safeguard the interests of crores of Indian mobile and internet users. This decision is a targeted move to ensure safety and sovereignty of Indian cyberspace."
- The IT Ministry statement also said that it has received many complaints from various sources, including several reports about the misuse of some mobile apps available on Android and iOS platforms for "stealing and covertly transmitting users' data in an unauthorised manner to servers which have locations outside India".
- China has urged India to immediately "correct what it called discriminatory practices" against Chinese companies.
- This is the first time that India, the world's second-largest internet market, has decided to ban so many foreign apps.
- SoftBank-backed TikTok alone has more than 200 million monthly active users in India presently.

What is the relevance of this ban?

- It seeks to protect the personal data of millions of Indians who have been participating in these social media apps and therefore deals with the security of our country.
 - For instance, as per a new Chinese national intelligence law in 2017, any organisation and citizen shall "support and cooperate in national intelligence work".
- In terms of the economic impact, the ban in all likelihood might put an end to huge profits that were sent outside our country.
- It is also a message to China that it is not going to be business as usual as far as India's relations with China are concerned particularly after the Galwan valley confrontation on the 15th of June.
 - The Indian Government is considering a ban on Huawei and ZTE, both prominent Chinese telecom vendors, just like the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which has designated them as "national security threats".
- Several Indians are upset with the ban of these Chinese apps, specifically TikTok because, for people, it had become a popular platform to make money online.
- But, this move will provide a huge impetus to India's own tech companies as foreign apps like TikTok, UC Browser, Weibo, Wechat, etc will now be out of the Indian market.
 - It will also provide an opportunity to further refine the apps that are already existing in India.

How difficult it is to ban these Apps

- The ban may push many Indian users towards using Virtual Private Networks (VPN) as there are no laws around using VPNs in India.
- Even if mainstream app stores like Google Play and Apple Store delete these banned applications, there are several third-party options to download them.

- Currently, this ban has to follow elaborate procedural norms listed in Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000 and the related Procedure and Safeguards for Blocking for Access of Information by Public Rules, 2009.
- However, Section 69A is not meant to deal with data harvesting, privacy, or (technical) security concerns. It is basically just a content regulation tool.

Can the order be challenged?

- There is a lot of ambiguity and opaqueness in the agreements/contracts which the parent companies of these Chinese apps have with the Government of China.
- Even after the ban has been ordered, the affected parent companies can challenge it in the Indian courts.

What's the alternative? Is it easy to develop apps on a similar scale such as - TikTok, WeChat?

The impact of the ban has to be understood in 3 aspects. All three segments have been impacted but very differently.

- **One is the users or common people** - Most of the time consumers do not know about their data being shared/used in a platform that is driven by ads. In an ad-driven platform, the customer itself becomes the product.
- **Second, the people who create content on these platforms/the Influencers** - People who have a huge following on an app like TikTok are saying that switching to an alternative right now is not a good idea.
 - They would rather start posting on Instagram or youtube and wait for TikTok to come back.
 - There is a hope that the following that they have built over the years will not go waste.
- **Third, are the developers** - From an app builder perspective, building these apps is not something that entrepreneurs in India have not done in the past or cannot do. There are many such apps that are seeing a lot of traction like Chingari.
 - Building such apps from a technology standpoint is one thing but getting that kind of adoption is another.
 - That is going to be a challenge because, for most of these people, the audience is global and not just Indian. Creating a huge following needs trust and that comes only with time.

Other countries have made similar cyber threat claims against China

- India is not the first country to have raised concerns about the privacy and security of smartphone applications built and promoted by Chinese companies.
- Many countries such as Australia, Germany, the UK and the US have either blocked Huawei 5G equipment or adopted stricter cybersecurity protocol for their use.
- The present ban in India is an extremely detailed order prepared through an extensive investigation by the Information & Technology Ministry. It is therefore not an impulsive decision just based out of the current tensions between India & China.

Impact on the larger picture of Sino-Indian ties

- This is only a sign of how in the post-COVID-19 world order, the Sino-Indian relations are going to be very different from what we have been witnessing from 1988 till the beginning of 2020.
- The purpose of the Prime Minister's recent visit to Leh is to address this very serious security issue that India is confronting currently from China.
- This ban is a part of a calibrated approach that may involve the banning of Huawei and ZTE later.
- Many banned apps were backed by Chinese giant Tencent.

- It has also invested in a number of Indian startups including "Swiggy", a food delivery company, "Hike", an instant messenger and "Practo", a healthcare app. This ban may discourage Chinese investment in India.
- According to Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian - "India has a responsibility to uphold the rights of Chinese businesses".

Data, as we all know, is the new gold. What are the challenges in safeguarding it?

- With over 5 million mobile phone users in India presently, it is a known fact that all personal information about the user (like travel history, dining, texting) is shared between the phone manufacturers (such as Google or Apple) and service providers.
- The intent of these companies comes into play here. Whether these phone manufacturers or service providers will use a consumer's data to improve his/her experience with their product or will they sell it to advertisers to sell it, in turn, to publishers and show the consumer ads that are more targeted.
- People have a mobile phone and they have their private life! That is totally a myth in the present world.
- However, not all consumers mind sharing their information as it leads to a better experience on their mobile devices.

What's the way forward?

- Becoming an interventionist like the Government in China or creating a golden shield with a mechanism to put surveillance over or block millions of websites or apps is an extreme and unneeded step.
- However national security or individual privacy issues must be addressed:
 - There has to be a deeper investigation to cover all foreign apps.
 - On the front of individual privacy, data localization has to be implemented as per the suggestions of the Personal Data Protection Bill, 2018.
 - Specific guidelines, principles and privacy requirements must be fulfilled while developing these apps.
- On a personal level, people must be cautious about which apps they download, and they must use only trusted apps.

Is this a new opportunity as far as the Indian IT sector is concerned?

- The Indian app development industry has evolved and grown tremendously over the years. Not only are the number of app downloads and users in India increasing each year, but there has also been an increase in the overall revenue generated from apps in the country.
- This is not just a trigger but also an opportunity to bring up more startups and more technology-oriented companies.
- The longevity would depend on the intent. If the Indian apps take care of privacy, that would generate trust and make all the stakeholders thrive in the ecosystem together.
- India should also manufacture APIs (Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients) as currently 70% to 80% of the imports are from China.
- As far as electronic products are concerned, reaching out to new partners like Taiwan could be a way forward.

