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SIM BINDING FOR WHATSAPP AND TELEGRAM: WHAT CHANGES ON 1 JANUARY

By **Kamlesh Bhagatkar**, *Politician, Author & Geopolitical Analyst · 17 November 2026*

In six weeks, the way most Indians use WhatsApp and Telegram will change. The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) has set 31 December 2026 as the deadline for messaging apps to put SIM binding in place, and reports by IANS and Inc42 say the rule will be operational from 1 January 2027. SIM binding means an app registered with an Indian mobile number will work on a phone only while the SIM for that number is present and active in it.

The latest detail came on Monday. MediaNama reported on 16 November, citing an industry source, that the DoT has clarified what "continuously linked" means: messaging apps should check for the user's SIM every 24 hours. The original directions used the word "continuously" without defining it. I have not seen the clarification published by the DoT itself, so I treat it as a report for now.

The directions cover WhatsApp, Telegram, Snapchat, Arattai, ShareChat, Josh, JioChat and Signal, according to the government's announcement on 1 December 2025. Not all of them are in the same place. Inc42, citing CNBC, reported in October that WhatsApp and Arattai have confirmed they are working to comply, that Telegram had not clarified its status, that Signal had not responded to government notices, and that Snapchat says the rule does not apply to it because it does not use phone numbers to identify users.

The problem the rule is meant to solve

The government's reasoning is simple, and I find it persuasive. Today, a WhatsApp or Telegram account keeps working long after the SIM that created it has been removed, deactivated or taken out of the country. The DoT says this gap is misused for cyber frauds, especially by people "operating outside the country", as News On AIR reported the ministry's announcement. In plain terms, an account registered once on an Indian number can go on calling Indians from abroad long after the SIM is gone, and it still looks local. The ministry links this to "digital arrest" frauds and to calls impersonating government officials.

The scale of the damage is not in doubt. Ministry of Home Affairs data reported by ThePrint in February shows Indians lost Rs 22,495 crore to cybercrime in 2025, against Rs 22,845 crore in 2024. Reported cases rose to 28.15 lakh from 22.68 lakh, a rise of about 24 per cent. Investment frauds took about 76 per cent of the money lost and digital arrests about 9 per cent, according to the same report.

The Supreme Court has used strong words. On 9 February 2026, a bench led by Chief Justice Surya Kant described the siphoning of more than Rs 54,000 crore through digital fraud as "robbery or dacoity", PTI and ThePrint reported, and observed that "the amount siphoned off by digital fraud is more than the budgets of many small states." The court asked the Centre to draft a standard operating procedure with the RBI, banks and the DoT, and asked them to work out a framework to compensate victims of digital arrest frauds.

I think of this as a question of national security as much as consumer protection. When the people defrauding Indian pensioners sit in another country and use our own telecom identities against us, the remedy has to start with those identities. The Cellular Operators Association of India made the same point in December 2025, saying SIM binding "ensures that our communication channels are not exploited freely from outside India by fraudsters or non-state actors." The COAI also said the rule "does not require any expanded data collection" by the apps.

How we got here

The DoT issued the directions on 28 November 2025 under the Telecom Cyber Security Rules. Apps were given 90 days to comply and 120 days to file a compliance report. The directions also said web and desktop versions of these apps must log users out periodically and let them link again with a QR code. ThePrint reported the limit for those sessions as six hours.

The pushback came quickly. On 23 February 2026, the Broadband India Forum, which represents Meta, Google and other large platforms, wrote to DoT Secretary Amit Agrawal with a senior counsel's opinion calling the direction "ultra vires the parent legislation", according to ThePrint and PTI. The argument is that a messaging app's use of a phone number falls outside the Telecommunications Act, 2023.

Communications Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia held his ground in public. On 25 February he told reporters that the "rules stood as they were", Republic reported, and that there was "no thought on relaxing the mandatory logout of web sessions beyond six hours." ThePrint quoted him saying: "On national security issues, there can be no compromise."

Five weeks later the government gave ground on timing and method, though not on the principle. On 2 April, PTI reported that the deadline had been extended to 31 December 2026 "following representation from the industry players", in the words of an official. The fixed six-hour logout was replaced with logouts based on risk analysis carried out by the platforms.

I think that was the right call. A rule that breaks daily life on the first morning loses public support, and a fraud rule needs public support more than most. Giving the companies the year while keeping the core requirement was a sensible trade.

What changes for users

Most people who keep their SIM in their main phone will notice little. For others, the change is real. According to the IANS explainer, if the registered SIM is removed, deactivated or replaced, the app may stop working until the same number is restored through a valid SIM or eSIM. The people most affected are those who keep the registered SIM in a second phone, those who take the SIM out after setting up the account, and those who use their phones mainly on Wi-Fi. An active eSIM on the device should be enough, the same report says.

Travellers can relax a little. The DoT has said international roaming is not affected as long as the SIM stays in the handset, ThePrint and Inc42 reported.

Families need to think about the shared phone. A survey by CUTS International, reported by PTI, found that about 86 per cent of users surveyed let family members use their phone or SIM for messaging, and that in 39 per cent of those cases the main SIM holder may not be nearby when authentication is needed. Around 80 per cent of consumers and more than 60 per cent of small and medium businesses expected disruption. Small traders who run their shop's WhatsApp on a counter phone or a computer will feel this first.

The open questions

Some experts doubt the rule will work as hoped. Dhruv Garg of the Indian Governance and Policy Project told ThePrint that "there are insufficient use cases to establish that SIM binding will definitively reduce fraud", and warned that users could move to anonymous platforms. Parag Kar, quoted by MediaNama, has argued that iOS does not expose SIM identifiers to apps and modern Android restricts them, so continuous checks need support from the phone makers. Inc42 and MediaNama both mention a CNBC report that Apple has updated iOS for SIM binding; MediaNama said it could not verify that.

The telecom companies are offering tools. MediaNama reports that Airtel has proposed silent authentication in place of OTPs, and that Vodafone Idea has a partnership with Meta on silent mobile verification. If these work, users may not see anything at all, which is how good security should feel.

My concern is with clarity. A rule that will touch almost every smartphone user in the country should not be explained through anonymous briefings. The 24-hour check, the treatment of eSIMs and Wi-Fi-only use, and the logout rules for web sessions should all be set out in one public document from the DoT before 1 January. Indian apps such as Arattai and JioChat are building to the same rule as

WhatsApp, and they deserve the same written certainty. I made a similar point about depending on others for our tunnel boring machines: self-reliance needs clear rules that Indian firms can plan around.

In the next six weeks, I will be watching whether the DoT publishes the 24-hour clarification, and whether Telegram and Signal confirm compliance, since an app that refuses would face a hard choice about its Indian users. After that, the test is the fraud data for 2027, when it comes. If the losses from digital arrests and impersonation calls fall, the inconvenience will have been worth it.

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