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SOCIAL MEDIA

SRI LANKA'S NEW WAR ZONE



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This essay examines the role of social media in shaping the post-war political developments in Sri Lanka as well as the ethnic question of Tamils. It explores how the social media has transformed the ethnic conflict within the new realm of cyberspace and the impact on post-war Sri Lankan ethnic question.

On 19, May 2013 Sri Lanka celebrated the 'War Heroes Day' to commemorate its military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was brutally decimated four years ago. Sri Lankans were treated to a sight of mass army parade, which not only displayed military might but also meant to serve as a deterrent to dissident elements in the country.

The bigger question is, whether the ethnic conflict was duly resolved with the end of LTTE or rather it descended into to a new phase. What seems very much palpable from the post-war socio-political developments is that the political issues related to ethnic Tamils have not been

addressed adequately, rather they have been systematically subjugated.

Of late, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) has been facing ire from the international community on its accountability for human rights abuses and war crimes. Despite attempts at political manoeuvring to evade international pressure, GoSL continues to lose its human rights battle along with loss of political legitimacy at home and abroad.

The government has failed to defend itself against two successive resolutions at the UNHRC and compromised its goodwill with India for China hoping that latter would shield it from international criticisms. It also overestimated the Chinese capacity to deepen or expand its influence in the region and misconstrued playing the China card, which was to act as a counterweight against India. It failed to fathom that Chinese presence, however deep and wide, would hardly translate into concrete action. Sri Lanka is still under

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the international scrutiny for alleged human rights abuses and war crimes.

Do these factors imply that the conflict has been taken to a new level, where Tamils' foremost demand is for justice than just peace. But the ground is not swelling with reprisal because of strong military presence and surveillance. Rather, it is very much alive and active in cyberspace, over which the GoSL has limited control.

Images and videos covertly capturing the brutality of the last phase of the war have gone viral online and in social media over the last few years. Though GoSL has successfully suppressed the print media in the island, social media, which provides ample space and freedom to express and expose facts about war crimes, remains a nightmare for the GoSL. For instance, Channel 4, a UK based Media released a series of video clippings picturing the Sri Lankan armed forces' atrocities and human rights abuses during the war. This has riled Tamils as well as human rights activists around the world.

It seems that though the GoSL had won the battle on 19 May 2009, the war still continues in a different realm – the cyberspace. The new battle field of this war is the space provided by the boundless social media and networking sites. The belligerents are GoSL and overseas Tamils including vast Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, serving as a virtual state. Kevin Coleman, chief strategist at Netscape, defines virtual state as a

nebulous community of people that self-identify and share in common one or more social, political and/or ideological convictions, ideas or values.

The internet and other communication technologies have given an opportunity to Sri Lankan Tamils-in-exile to vent their collective resentment against the GoSL without any censorship or scrutiny.

I WEAPONS OF MASS DISSEMINATION (WMD): YOU TUBE, BLOGS AND FACEBOOK

The end of the Elam War IV heralded a new era in Sri Lankan political history, which is characterised by unprecedented peace, if not complete ethnic harmony in the island nation. While the Sinhalese-dominated GoSL was jubilant over its historic military victory over Tamils separatist movement - the LTTE, the ethnic political question of Tamils remains unresolved. The idea of Tamil Elam or self-determination for Tamils has not become obsolete. Social media has transformed the nature of mass expression and participation for asserting socio-political rights.

To understand how the social media operates it is important to know what the social media is. Multiple definitions on social media are available in current literature. But Ron Jones' definition is considered to be the best. According to Ron Jones, an internet marketing expert, "Social media essentially is a category of online media where people are talking, participating, sharing, networking, and bookmarking online.

Most social media services encourage discussion, feedback, voting, comments, and sharing of information from all interested parties. It's more of a two-way conversation, rather than a one-way broadcast like traditional media. Another unique aspect of social media is the idea of staying connected or linked to other

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sites, resources, and people”.

Going by this definition one can easily estimate the delicate role played by the social media in reconstructing the Tamil national identity beyond political boundaries. This community defies political borders and social barriers but operates as a subtle political force galvanizing the sympathy and support across the world for the freedom of Tamils. In this case, the real potential of social media to unearth the truth and unveil the brutality of Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF) came to fore only after two years from the end of the war in 2011. This was due to lack of internet awareness amongst the first generation of Tamils as well as restricted access to regional and international media in the warzones, barring them from capturing the real ground situation. It was only after the Channel 4, a British TV station broadcasted a series of videos depicting the summary execution of the Tamils and LTTE soldiers by the SLAF under the pseudonym of “Killing Fields of Sri Lanka”, the battle against GoSL was renewed and taken to the realm of the social media. Field videos and pictures have gone viral online and outraged Tamils around the world ever since.

There are three predominant tools which have been very effective in animating the Tamil's political discourse online: YouTube, Facebook and Blogs. Social media tools are becoming very popular among the second generation of Tamils mostly teens. These social networking sites serve as a post-war propaganda tool for Sri Lankan Tamils and their sympathisers to demonise the GoSL and their supporters post-war. Social media has demystified the elusive war zone stories calibrated by the GoSL during the final phase of the war.

Currently, Facebook, the most commonly used social media tool to connect and communicate with people, has 24 registered online groups focusing on Tamil

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Eelam and 15 dedicated pages that portray the suffering and sacrifice of Tamils during and after the war. Besides these exclusive spaces, an individual Facebook user can post his or her personal comments or views on the wall. Prabhakaran's photos, LTTE red flags and Tamil Eelam maps are the prominent images being posted on their walls.

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The new generation of Tamils particularly those born after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination tend to be more emotional and expressive on the question of Tamil Eelam and even display undeterred resolution in supporting the cause of Tamils in Sri Lanka. Until 2009, the GoSL faced or fought with a single headed monster, the LTTE but in a post-war scenario, Sri Lanka is confronted with multi-headed monsters mushrooming all over the world.

II TAMIL EELAM – A VIRTUAL STATE

It is apparent that the demand for a separate Tamil Eelam as a solution to the ethnic problem has withered away with the demise of the LTTE, the sole protagonist who vowed to establish the same through military means. What does Tamil Eelam mean?

It is a proposed independent state comprising Northern and Eastern part of Sri Lanka where Tamils are majority. The aspiration to create an independent state for Tamils in Sri Lanka was born out of frustration over the Sinhalese systematic political alienation in the early 70s. Since then it has been a utopian dream for Tamils around the world.

There is no doubt that the revival of such demand is unlikely to emerge from the Sri Lankan soil, at least for now, and even if it reappears, the vigilant GoSL, which has unprecedented military presence in the country now might be able to nip it in the bud. The recent suppression of the student's protests in Jaffna by the Sri Lankan armed forces using disproportionate strength is a case in point. For now, Sri Lanka seems more worried over international pressure than domestic uprising(s).

A momentum has been built over the years to indict GoSL for violation of international law and war crimes during the war. There has been a strong and vibrant movement to indict the GoSL for

human rights abuses, notably from online Tamil community. Although it is an amorphous community, it has proved to be very effective in exposing the brutal reality of the war and in sharing provocative images that kindled the collective conscience of Tamils across the world through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so on.

Social media has played a significant role in bringing the Arab Spring, which dethroned despotic regimes in the Arab world. The power of social media in bringing about political change without external support or interference is unprecedented as evinced in the case of the Arab Spring. Likewise, social media has been shaping the political discourse of Sri Lanka since the end of the war. It brought disrepute to Sri Lanka in the international arena and pushed India into a policy dilemma. It helped Tamils to articulate their political grievances and assert their rights of self-determination without censorship and state prosecution. The political imagination of Sri Lankan Tamils for a separate Tamil Eelam in order to preserve their socio-cultural identity has been reinforced yet again in cyberspace through social media.

Until the advent of social media, Tamils were divided on the lines of geography, nationality and religious affinity. For instance, Tamils in India conceded their sympathy and support to the idea and dream of establishing a separate Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka after the assassination of the late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE. But the Tamil diaspora in Europe, South East Asian countries continued their support for their political causes despite the alienation by their brethren in Tamil Nadu, India.

The defeat of LTTE in 2009 by the Sri Lankan army was seen by Tamils across the world as the subjugation of Tamil rights to assert their cultural identity and political space in the Sinhalese-dominated political system of the island

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nation. The struggle to achieve self-determination for Tamils in Sri Lanka was thus a result of successive Sinhalese government's disregard to Tamils plea for joint-determination of socio-political rights through devolution of political authority. What Veluppillai Chelvanayakam, the father of Tamil Eelam tried to achieve through democratic means was later attempted by Veluppillai Prabhakaran, the slain leader of the LTTE through military means, after Sinhalese crushed the democratic movements of Tamils using military forces.

The post-LTTE era provided a new space for Tamils to come together and express their strong dissent and distress towards the Sri Lankan government. Even though the LTTE is proscribed as a terrorist organisation by 32 countries including India, its political ideal or imagination to create a separate Tamil Nation still remains alive and is reinforced in the social media by the virtual community of young Tamils. Absence of state censorship, intimidation, suppression or even surveillance makes the cyberspace most viable for Tamils to articulate their resentment against the GoSL. Moreover, this information highway provides undistorted facts on the current situation or what had happened on the ground on an unprecedented scale to everyone everywhere. It unmask the real concerns or stands on the issues of various political parties or organisations and discourages them from manufacturing opinions and build consensus on self-propagated myths about the Tamil Elam.

Even during the final phase of the war, the mainstream media including the print media, in Sri Lanka and India maintained caution and suppressed several details while reporting the day-to-day operations and causalities. It was the social media which actually exposed the brute reality of the war and human atrocities committed by the Sri Lankan armed forces. Thus, social media has dramatically altered the political

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discourse of Sri Lankan Tamils after the war.

It is obvious that social media has been shaping the geopolitical dynamics in the region by providing space for articulation of multiple narratives. The idea of a separate Tamil Nation has therefore not died with the demise of LTTE instead, it has become very much vibrant and is being consolidated in the social media as a virtual state with an imagined territory, homogenous online population but without a pecking social order.

III CONCLUSION

The ethnic question to restore Tamil identity by establishing Tamil Eelam, a separate Tamil nation in Sri Lanka has not been subdued with the elimination of LTTE rather it has been reinvented and reinforced by social media.

Although there is no real or direct impact of this new phenomenon on the ground situation in Sri Lanka in the post-war period, social media has been shaping the nature of protest and freedom struggle through non-violent means. During the last two United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolutions on Sri Lanka meet, social media has played a crucial role domestically as well as in Indian by consolidating the Tamil opinions, sentiments and feelings.

As a result of this increasing awareness and nurturing of strong grievances to do something to implicate the GoSL, the international community has been resolute in promoting reconciliation and accountability in Sri Lanka. As result of their consistent effort, things are changing on the ground where the GoSL has relaxed certain restrictions to access warzones by the international human rights observers and journalists.

The regional political parties from Tamil Nadu have also upped the ante against the ruling congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a key and long-term ally of the UPA has been even pulled out of the government due to growing mass resentment in Tamil Nadu, amplified by the social media. India also voted against Sri Lanka in the UNHRC in order to appease its domestic Tamil constituency.

Moreover, social media played a larger role in the recent Tamil's students protest across Tamil Nadu, where more than 600 colleges and schools were shut down out of rage amongst students. This has forced the ruling government to pass a resolution in Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly against the GoSL and demanded the union government to impose economic sanctions on Sri Lanka. It is thus evident that social media enables the democratic struggle against the authoritarian regimes and acts as a force multiplier.

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