



CONTEMPORARY LADAKH **FACEBOOK, TWITTER & THE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN KARGIL**

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The importance of virtual communities prevalent on social networking sites is evident from the recent wave of changes in the Arab World. Virtual communities have emerged as an important tool for information, negotiation, transmission of ideas, and collective decision making.

Internet has revolutionized the world of communication. Social networking sites and other internet features have brought a radical qualitative change in communication, not only in terms of access to information for the masses but also control over information generation. Among the various sections of populace, social networking sites have facilitated greater participation of youths in any movement.

In Kargil, the social networking sites and

alternate ways of communication through internet have demonstrated a potential to play a role in the transformation. This is evident from the series of virtual communities related to Kargil that have flourished on various social networking sites.

Kargil, due to its topographic location and lack of governmental attention remains isolated from the rest of India for several months in a year. Despite all the odds, the people of Kargil have explored alternate avenues to connect with the rest of the world. The influence of internet, an outcome of the mediocre internet facilities, and the social networking sites is immense on the society and people are actively connected to YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook.

Facebook is the leading social networking site that facilitates people, particularly youth, to share and exchange information. These exchanges are both of intra-regional and global in terms of the nature of issues they involve. These exchanges of information through social networking sites have created a new

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wave of activism particularly among youths on multiplicity of issues related to the region.

This essay assesses the role of media in creating social change in the Kargil region. In so doing it explores how social networking sites have altered the range of issues, which were part of societal concern from religion to development. These debates and their content will provide a brief sketch of the socio-political discourse, which stems from the region.

The essay will also analyse the postings on the pages of Facebook communities related to Kargil like Jago Kargil Jago, Visit Kargil, Zojila Watch, and All Kargil Ladakh Students Union Delhi (AKSUD). These pages average about a thousand followers. Thus looking into the activities of these communities would give a good lead on the direction of thoughts and new ideas of the present generation and an understanding about the contemporary society of Kargil.

Communication technology has revolutionized the world in a virtual way. Two billion people exchange thoughts, ideas, and information without any censorship just on Facebook alone. Mark Zuckerberg while emphasizing the social utility of Facebook mentioned, 'the question is not what we want to know about people, it is what people want to tell about themselves'. At the same time freedom of expression involves a strong notion of power, power to assert popular opinion, power of dissent, disapproval,

and dismantling of regimes based on repression, brutalization and maiming of masses. 'When you give everyone a voice and give people power, the system usually ends up in a really good place. So, what we view our role as, is giving people the power', remarked Zuckerberg. This power of voices was witnessed during the Arab Spring where communication technology especially social networking helped people to spread the ideological framework of protests everywhere, doing to dust all acts of state repression.

The desperation caused autocratic establishments to resort to communication blockade. For instance in Egypt, the Hosni Mubarak regime, in order to prevent people from communicating and exchanging anti-state views, blocked internet facilities to curb social networking. People posted plan, place, and protest methodology on their profiles to create consciousness of defense, offense, and resistance, while facing the state during the whole phenomenon of regime change, which finally witnessed the ousting of the Mubarak regime and Egypt's march towards democracy.

In Tunisia, the autocratic government of Zine el Abidine Bin Ali was the first to realize the potential of social networking sites towards mobilization of masses. Therefore, the Tunisian government attempted desperately to curb the free flow of dissent through social networking sites by ordering Internet blockade. However, it miserably failed since the international community raised alarm against isolation for, in such circumstances, establishments notoriously kill voices of dissent. The government had to give up before the popular voices, and with the Zine el Abidine regime returning power back to the people the world witnessed Tunisia's march towards democracy.

Thus more than the role-played by television where most of the information is censored and TRP is the driving factor, social networking where people without fear psychosis, without any censor ,

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without any care for criticism and appreciation post ideas that confront them, helped in a great measure in bringing about the Arab Spring.

Actions are always driven by ideas and revolutions occur because of some great ideas. In its April 2011 report, Amnesty International applauded, appreciated, and acknowledged the role played by digital technology in facilitating people-to-people communication during Arab Spring. While social networking works to offer space to popular voices in places like Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain; in other contexts it offers space for discussions and debates on social, political, and economic issues

From minor social issues to major political debates people particularly students actively participate, commenting continuously and thereby enriching our knowledge and improving our methodologies to diligently deal with those issues in time. Through social networking sites our mind, sometimes to meet with a friend living distances across, takes a flight by posting a comment and immediately we get to know about him/her. Thus, it virtually brings us closer than the actual and physical communication.

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In the context of Kargil, the social networking sites proved to be an alternative source of getting information and communication. The topographic location of Kargil coupled with the negligence of the government in building necessary infrastructures of development hampered the overall connectivity. Failure of the main stream media to focus on issues of the region engraves the

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problem even more. However, the attempt to offer strength to Kargil's voice is being taken by many pages on social networking sites.

People are active on many sites like, Twitter and YouTube. Facebook is the leading social network site in this regard. For the purpose of this analysis, some of the networks that are active towards informing students and masses about different issues happening in and around Kargil (mentioned earlier) are taken into consideration.

These communities are focusing on different important issues. *Visit Kargil*, a page created on Facebook in 2011, is focusing on the developmental aspects of the region; *Jago Kargil Jago* by the name itself denotes that it is concerned about the political awakening. AKSUD, the page of the students organized body in and around Delhi, is concerned with education and many other topics.

A comprehensive analysis of the above and the issues that these communities are concerned with needs further analysis.

Visit Kargil

Visit Kargil, through dissemination of information, attempts to connect people with a culturally rich and dynamically resourceful valley of the Kargil Ladakh region. If you peek into its history, you would be enthralled and dazzled by its

mosaic lifestyle and heritage. This beautiful district is a melting pot of not just one group of people, but sustains culturally diverse tribes like Purik, Balti, and Brokpa.

Through Visit Kargil, many people could become aware of this magical part of J&K and could sign up and show interest in actually visiting Kargil. The major industry that could flourish in Kargil is tourism, so the page is vital in providing information about Kargil as a hotspot tourist destination, with its snowcapped mountains, serene valleys, green meadows, and warm hospitality of the locals. People can share their photographs and memories of their visit to this beautiful place. It tries to exhort and to encourage people to visit the region, as tourism in Kargil is still lacking despite all the existing potential, mainly adventure tourism.

According to Nawab Tangrhong "Visit Kargil is the first hand Facebook gallery of Kargil, Ladakh that captivates the serene Suru valley, wrinkled hills of Drass, snowcapped mountains of Zanskar, high passes of Chiktan, the tiny rivulets, the lifestyle of Dards, Baltis and Purigs. A visit to Visit Kargil will generate a never dying desire to visit the high abode of heaven called Kargil, Ladakh".

The creation of this page on a social network by the youths is commendable and gives a wakeup call for the state establishment which treat Kargil as its foster child. This page has (during mid 2013) 1,953 members and expanding.

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Jago Kargil Jago

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The political interest groups in the township, in fact, divide the society into many factions out of which certain politically powerful groups emerge on the surface, the domination of the clerics (sheikhs/agas) and the so-called elite section kachos/munshis. They act as heads deciding the political leadership in most cases. The political puzzle starts from local to regional, from sectarian to communal.

During the election of Ladakh Hill Development Council, Kargil, the sectarian or communitarian side of the many facets of evil practices in politics emerges on the surface, based on the dividing lines of Aga/sheikh/kachos and others. The conundrum further intensifies when it comes to M.P elections, where the clerical domination is visible more clearly, as the support of religion becomes more important than the popular mandate.

MP constituency of Ladakh became a communal agenda, where the trend is to support Muslims from Kargil, which is dominated by Muslim population and the support for the Buddhist in Leh district. This is because of the influence of the dominated sections of the society and the nexus between them.

Members of the *Jago Kargil Jago* are active in questioning these problems prevalent in the sphere of politics, high handedness of the clerics, and of the dominated sections. In the description of the page Jago Kargil Jago, the unnamed administrator clearly states that "it is for the inclusive nature" that challenges the

divisive politics in Kargil, and bringing about an awareness of political activism. It has around 2,428 members for now.

Members who are young and well educated speak out their mind and heart on this page about the divisive politics in Kargil. One can judge by the comments of these young minds on this page that they are angry and disillusioned and want change for the greater good. This kind of page can indeed play a vital role in consolidating the differences or constructing ways out of the problems. It is helpful to change the communal mindset and to have better politics for the whole region of Ladakh.

Jago Kargil Jago is famous and frequently visited where one can learn about the basics of Kargil politics. Some of the postings from this page can highlight the changing mindsets. Posts like these also portray the growing awareness and anger in the socio-political platform:

- "We are demanding for Air Service for our own people of Kargil."
- "Yes! We voted for the Councillors & CEC LAHDC-K, MLC & MLA Kargil and MP Ladakh but WHERE ARE THEY TODAY???"
- "700 people from Kargil have been suffering in jammu due to FAKE PROMISES of the state Govt. of J&K."
- "What the British Govt in London did with the Indians. Indians are doing with us. Khud Buisness class mein chalte hain, hume jangi jhahaz ke liye tarsaya jata hai. Hafte mein ek baar aa bhi jaye tow hamare baap pe ehsan samajte hain). forget that we are also tax payers."
- "Omar Abdullah aye tow Chartered planes aur helicopters. Is the Combined dignity of people of kargil not equal to one Omar."
- "Hukamraan ho gaye kamine log,khaak mein mil gaye nagine log.....".

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All Kargil Students Union Delhi (AKSUD)

Few years ago, students of Kargil in Delhi created this group. The purpose was to stay connected despite studying in different colleges and universities. The site saw an increase in membership as new students joined the group. This group is very active as well as informative. It informs about the social, religious, and educational gatherings of Kargili students with information regarding time, date, and venue.

Students studying in Delhi or outside frequently visit this group to gather information mostly related to admissions and forms. The administrators and the media-coordinator of the students union frequently update important issues or gatherings of the students. This group is very helpful and helps one stay connected with each other. Occasionally AKSUD organizes cultural functions and holds religious gatherings. Most of the students meet and know of these gatherings through this page.

Zojila Watch

This page is one year old and the administrator is an alumnus from JNU. This page brings out the plight of the Ladakhi people who are disconnected from the rest of the world during winters. This page talks about the importance of a long

pending demand of an all weather tunnel connecting Ladakh to the rest of India. Members are both old and young who also organized a signature campaign to raise their demand with the President of India. Most of them are Ladakhi but interestingly some non-Ladakhi are also active on this page. This group exclusively talks about the strategic importance of a tunnel for India.

The administrator of Zojila Watch keeps us updated about any piece of news or information related to the long cherished dream of a tunnel by the people of Ladakh. "Release: Sept 14, 2102 : The Cabinet Committee on Infrastructure today approved the implementation of the construction of the 6.50 kms long two lane bi-directional tunnel on a new alignment in between Gagangir and Sonamarg, along the exiting NH-1 at Z-Morh, approved by Public Private Partnership Appraisal Committee for all weather connectivity from Srinagar to Leh on NH-1 (old NH -1D) in Jammu and Kashmir on BOT (Annuity) basis."

Ali Mousavi, an active member of different communities on Facebook, says "In facebook , I come to know about news, social activities and several ongoing programmes regarding Kargil, Ladakh and also I share my ideas and acquire ideas about social political educational and other issues."

As a global phenomenon, social networking has a deeper impact on many societies across the world. The above discussed pages from Facebook,

guide us towards the anticipation of change. The dynamic trends on the virtual communities assert and express in their unique ways demands for their rights. The attempts to awaken the concerned ministries from deep slumber, to hold debates and discussion on public forums is indeed fruitful and enriching. Now the need of the hour is to make it better and more convenient.

Application of ideas from virtual discourses on Facebook in real community discourses would be a very useful approach with splendid results. To conclude, the social networking is indeed a tool of change but it cannot be termed so unless it impacts in bringing the change on the real surface and arena. It was through information on AKSUD page that people came forward to offer financial help to a friend in need recently. The Facebook communities are also the best and easiest ways for promising students to seek information regarding educational institutions, admissions and so on.

Combined together, all the above factors consequentially in long run bring about change, and that is true both in global context and in the context of Ladakh.

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