**Municipal Public Relations: Increasing Importance**

**Experience of Kolkata Municipal Corporation**

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**ABSTRACT:**

*Public Relations, known as planned and sustained effort for image management is gaining importance in many dimensions. With the more and more popular approach to decentralized development the importance of the local governments are also in rise. With their increasing importance, the scope of using Public Relation mechanism in that periphery is also gaining popularity. Municipal Public Relations, therefore, can very well be instrumental for bridging the municipal policy makers and the citizens for more effective bonding. It can further be used for managing image of the municipalities. Though the concept is not very commonly or regularly explored, the experience of Kolkata Municipal Corporation can be discussed in the role of a model in Indian context.*

***Key words:*** *Public Relations, Municipal Public Relations, Kolkata Municipal Corporation*

1. **INTRODUCTION TO PUBLIC RELATIONS :**

Edward Bernays, regarded as one of the founder of the genre Public Relations, defined it as *“a management function which tabulates public attitudes, defines the policies, procedures and interest of an organization followed by executing a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance****”*[1].** The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) submitted: *"Public Relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other***"[2].** According to the PRSA, the essential functions of Public Relations include research, planning, communication dialogue and evaluation.

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This process of Public Relations definitely aims at two-way communication to foster mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics. Public means people as a whole – a group of people sharing common interests or values in a particular situation. But in Public Relations one has to identify the public in specific terms so that they can be reached out with planned specific messages and can be persuaded to attain specific organizational goals. Publicis a professional term to the people who are involved in public relations activities. For them, it doesn’t mean the mob or the masses. It means a type of audience. The word ‘publics’ is important to understand to segregate different types of audiences for their specific, purposeful communication*.* To attain specific goals, Public Relations professionals must identify internal publics and external publics properly. Internal publics are the employees of the organizations. Connecting them is essential for keeping control over the execution of plans or policies the organization wants to deliver. On the contrary, external publics are the other stake holders, whose impressions about the organization actually frame the image of the organization. Public Relations from the point of its effectiveness may also be considered as image management. To build and rebuild the image of an organization can very well be determined as focus of Public Relations practitioners.

1. **MUNICIPAL PUBLIC RELATIONS :**

Municipal Public Relations emerged as a concept after World War II. Its purpose was highlighted by Pan Dodd Wheeler in the article ‘Municipal Public Relations’- *“to establish and energize communication between city government and the citizen – using existing channels where available and creating new ones where necessary – in the interest of an informed public opinion.’’***[3]** It is important to have favorable public sentiment otherwise it will be like Abraham Lincoln’s statement that *“with public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed****.”[*4]** The editor of The American City magazine Harold S. Buttenheim recognized municipal government as a stronghold of democratic process; it is closest to the people and potentially most responsive to their desire. He took the initiative in the early 50’s to provide better communication between city and citizen. Municipal Public Relations’ role has emerged out to be extremely vital here. It is an organized effort to influence public opinion so that the citizen can react with the municipal government with facts. It is also argued that good municipal governance is the basis of good Municipal Public Relations. But as mentioned in Pan Dodd Wheeler’s article Municipal Public Relations turns the spotlight on city government operation in such a way that both good and bad are illuminated. Mention should also be made about the flexibility of the concept. Municipal Public Relations has to be designed according to the different character of the different cities. Pan Dodd Wheeler’s article also has mentioned a study of Government Public Relations Association of America which has also discussed the functions of Municipal Public Relations. They are - consulting with the legislative and administrative officials and advice them on the public relations aspect of city policy; maintaining close relationship with the mass media and help them to obtain information easily; arranging for citizen tours; arranging meetings, conducting surveys, supervising reports, writing letters, prepare posters, handling complaints, arranging for open house, displays and other special events; planning and writing employee publication and handbooks. In some cities the Municipal Public Relations unit also conducts municipal research, it collects and prepares data on city government and make it available to the officials, employees and citizens. It is also the responsibility of the unit to arrange for advertising, fairs, displays, festivals and special promotion. Sam Black in his book Practical Public Relations has also thrown lights on main objects of Public Relations in local government. They are to keep citizens informed about the policy and daily activities; to give citizens opportunity to express views on important issues; to enlighten citizens on the system of governance and inform them about their rights and responsibilities; to promote a sense of civic pride**.[5]** The concept is well explored in the developed countries but even the developing countries now cannot deny the necessity and importance of Municipal Public Relations.

* 1. **Municipal Public Relations: Increasing Importance :**

In today’s competitive world Public Relations is considered as an unavoidable tool to create and maintain image of any organization. It plays a vital role in shaping the perception about any organization in contemporary world. Not only the private organizations but the Government organizations also have to take the help of Public Relations nowadays with an intention to cater their target audience more scientifically. Civic bodies are the grassroots of democratic structure of our country. In fact civic bodies have to meet up with the daily and primary needs of the community. They deal with the fundamental aspirations of the people. Services provided by these local governments vary from primary necessities like providing primary education, maintenance of road, collection of tax and so on. One must appreciate how tough it is to manage these diversified activities but culminating these services into a favorable perception about the concerned civic body is bound to be more complex and tougher. The job is not only to deal with general public on a daily basis; there has to be daily communication with people coming from different social strata- be it of the highest rank or a man earning his food on a daily basis. So the range of these organizations’ internal and external publics is huge and varied. The modern cities are turning into social phenomenon of almost unbelievable complexities. Here lies the important role of Municipal Public Relations.

The 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Indian Constitution accorded status to village and city councils and created a national framework for local governments by stipulating fixed five-year term, regular elections and State Finance Commissions to review and augment their finances. The 74th Amendment has reiterated the list of function of the municipalities. It is clear indication of the increasing importance of local governments in one of the biggest democratic structure of the world. On one hand, it is qualitative advancement in the context of decentralized approach of democratic practice; and on the other hand it clearly suggests the increasing importance of Municipal Public Relations in the Indian context for connecting the community in a more planned and structured manner.

* 1. **Municipal Public Relations: Modus Operandi**

Hans Riemer from Vienna presented a paper entitled ‘General Aspects: Public Relations in a Democracy’[6] in World Conference o f Local Governments held in Washington, D.C. during June 15-20, 1961 focused on the genre as one of the pioneer. He uttered - the problems of local authorities in the field of influencing public opinion are twofold in nature: On the one hand, they arise from the positive interest of the localities and their enterprises in informing the people concerning a specific problem, clarifying things for them, or winning them over for special purposes; on the other hand, they are a kind of defense activity. One often sees in wide circles of the population a certain animosity towards the public authorities and enterprises, a certain distrust of the municipality as a corporation whose members is not recognizable as individuals and thus represents the purest type of anonymity. In these strata of the population, a distrust of all public facilities is generally noticeable, which is often nourished by the same circles which like to attack the so-called omnipotence of the state. Often the most altruistic and best managed installations of public service are maligned and alienated from the under­standing of the people by this segment of the population. This negative propaganda may be observed even in the municipal public welfare agen­cies, in the hospitals, youth and old-age homes, schools and public health agencies. … Although we have to reach the broadest possible public with our Public Relations, we must not overlook what is near at hand, that is, the narrower circle of co-workers, one’s own personnel. There is no doubt that one of the primary tasks of community public relations is to instruct one’s own employees regarding the nature and conduct of the local administration, the functioning of the democratically formed executive corporation and its organs, as well as local institutions for the welfare of the citizen body and community industrial operations. …The extent of the public relations of the individual community and the instrumentalities it uses will depend upon the size of the city and the variety of its public tasks. Basically, the local authorities should avail themselves of all suitable devices and potentialities of public relations which will have an impact on the public. .. This is an important task which must be performed with the greatest sense of responsibility, accuracy and integrity, and in the knowledge of all the data regarding the inside operation of the local administration, its establish­ments and installations.

Lee K. Jaffe, the then Director of Public Relations, The Port of New York Authority also presented a paper entitled ‘Public Relations in Local Government’[7] in the said World Conference of Local Governments held in Washington, D.C. during June 15-20, 1961 and enlightened some very unique aspects about the genre of Public Relations activities of the Local Governments. He emphasized the importance of good performance as basic necessity of successful image management, which developed in the later times and today many defines Public Relations or P.R. as performance recognition. He uttered- Good government public relations are good performance — publicly appreciated. It is a democratic way of life. Government must first do a job that people can think well of and then intelligently and deftly call attention to it. .. It must be appreciated that an effective and continuing public relations program for a municipality large enough to support it can be developed only through a central public relations department operating under the direction of a competent specialist who is backed by sound and honest administration. This specialist must have an important voice in the formation of policy. Under no circumstances should he be used as a personal or political press agent. And he must never be used as a cover-up man to hide bad performance or otherwise to deceive the people. The existence of an effective central public relations department prevents conflict in policy and errors in communication. At the same time, it serves the important purpose of providing for communications media a responsible and convenient information source…. The failure of municipalities to provide central public relations departments and to use public relations to further their programs is caused to a great extent by their fear that the public and the press would react unfavorably toward such an effort. Nothing could be further from the truth…. Local public relations programs should feature the release of news. This, of course, is one of the most important phases of a municipal public relations program, as I have indicated before. And naturally, there are great public relations benefits to be found, provided your budget permits, in the fullest possible use of radio, advertising, movies and exhibits, simply written and illustrated annual reports and other reports, promotional brochures, material for schools and the like.

* 1. **Municipal Public Relations: Principal Objectives :**

The objectives of Municipal Public Relations can be jotted down like this:

1. Minimize apathy of the public, and to ensure positive understanding of the system of functioning of the local Government.
2. To ensure public support for the policies and programs.
3. To inform and educate the citizens about merits of the policies persuaded so that it is appreciated by the public which can also be beneficial in electoral terms
4. To maintain sense of confidence and trust among public on the elected local Government.
5. To share information, in a transparent mechanism about local Government’s plans, policies, future prospects with the public
6. To assure and inform public about transparent and effective use of public funds and generate public support
7. To update and report public about the developmental activities
8. To report public about the social responsibility aspect of the elected local Government
9. To plan publicity for bridging gaps between the elected local Government and public
10. To provide the citizens a platform for redressal of grievance for providing a feeling of participation.
	1. **KOLKATA MUNICIPAL CORPORATION: IT’S EVOLUTION :**

Kolkata Municipal Corporation happens to be a Public Relations conscious body from a long period. From the pre-independent era to present decentralized period, its evolution can be termed as vibrant presence in the history of local governance. The first municipal organ was also launched from this organization. This very organization provided the platform of participation in the local governance even before the independence. It has been a unique sphere of nationalist intervention in the civic administration. Kolkata Municipal Corporation is not only one of the premiere local government organizations but it is a pioneering organization of the country who has explored the potentialities of Municipal Public Relations from the very early days. It is a unique organization in that context.

In the early years, municipal authority was absent in Calcutta. A Mayor’s Court with judicial functions was established in 1726. It undertook some civic work in order to attract dwellers to the city. On 12 August 1765 the Diwani of Bengal was granted to the East India Company. Judicial and revenue-collecting functions were vital part of it, and it also associated a moral obligation to provide civic services. It can be termed as the initiating point of providing civic service in Calcutta.

In the early part of the 19th Century the Governor-Generals tried to raise funds for improvements in the City by running Lotteries. This funded new roads, improved old roads, dug tanks, and built a Town Hall. From the middle of the 19th Century discussions were initiated to establish a Municipal Corporation for Calcutta. Many opined that the growing city needed proper and specialized management to deal with its prospects and problems.

In 1847 the electoral system was introduced for the first time and a Board was constituted with 7 paid members, four of whom were elected by the rate payers. The Board was authorized to purchase and hold property for improvement of the town, and to maintain roads and drains. In 1852, this Board was replaced by a new one of four members, of whom two were appointed by the Government and two were elected. Taxes were collected from houses, light, horses and vehicular traffic.

In 1863 a new body was formed which elected its own Vice Chairman, and had a regular Health Officer, Engineer, Surveyor, Tax Collector and Assessor. It was during this time that the drainage and water supply were on the focus of development. The New Market was established in 1874. Footpaths were made along with the main roads, and many other improvements carried out. The house tax was also raised.

In 1876 a new Corporation was created with 72 Commissioners. 48 of the Commissioners were elected by ratepayers and 24 appointed by the Government. During this time the two railway terminals at Howrah and Sealdah were connected by Harrison Road.

The most important changes were initiated by the Act of 1923. Rashtraguru Surendranath Banerjee as the first Minister for Local Self-Government in Bengal was instrumental for it. This Act liberalized the constitution on democratic understanding, with the increase of power of the body, and the relaxation of Governmental control. A large area was also added form "Greater Calcutta." Women were enfranchised for the first time under this Act.

Calcutta Municipal Act, 1951 was a landmark in the history of nationalist intervention in the civic administration. Father of Indian nationalism Rastraguru Surendranath Banerjee was instrumental for that. The new Act envisaged the Corporation as a policy-making, directive and rule making body. The Act reduced the number of Councillors and almost all of them had to represent general territorial constituencies excepting one ex-officio member. Whereas the earlier Act had special territorial and non territorial provision for electing Councillor. The new Act had the provision of electing five Aldermen by the Councillors and a Mayor and a deputy Mayor by the Aldermen and Councillors. The Act provided three distinct and independent authorities; (1) the Corporation, (2) the seven standing committees for education, health, accounts, taxation, town planning, works and buildings, and (3) the Commissioner. The Mayor had been given important power. Thus the Act focused on decentralization and governance simultaneously. Post independent reforms in local governance had its genesis in this Act.

The Calcutta Municipal Corporation Act 1980 came into existence on January 1984. It also extended the boundaries of Calcutta Municipal Corporation. The number of wards of the Corporation was raised from 100 to 141.The provisions relating to the slums were modified. Most significant amendment of the Act was the introduction of "Mayor-in-Council", with all the attributes of the Cabinet of Government. It is relevant to mention that after the execution of the Act one Mayor-in-Council was entrusted to take charge of the Education, Culture and Public Relations department. This was a unique step in the area of Municipal administration in India. According to the Act the Corporation would group the wards of the Corporation into Boroughs. Each Borough should have a Committee consisting of the Councillors elected from the respective wards of the Borough. The Councillors would elect one of them as the chairperson of the said Borough. Thus the Act focused on decentralization to the grass root level and by empowering people’s representative over the executives it also acknowledged and ensured broad base voice of the people on the provided service.

The Act of 1980 also formed the framework of the modern Corporation with the Municipal Commissioner as the Principal Executive Officer subject to the control and supervision of the Mayor as the Chief Executive Officer. He is assisted by a group of Senior Civil Officers comprising Joint Municipal Commissioners, Deputy Municipal Commissioners, Chief Engineers, Controller of Municipal Finance and Accounts, Chief Municipal Auditor and Municipal Secretary. Subsequent to the renaming of the city in 2001, the Corporation is now known as the Kolkata Municipal Corporation. From 2000 one Mayor-in-Council has been entrusted to take charge of the Information and Public Relations department.

* 1. **Kolkata Municipal Corporation: Public Relations Exercices :**

In the year 1932 publicity department was created in this organization. Prior to this the Gazette department published the Calcutta Municipal Gazette from November 1924 under the auspicious editorship of noted journalist Amal Home. It needs to be mentioned that it was a unique municipal organ which was first of such character in not only India but Asia. The publicity department organized many exhibitions especially on health related issues. The Department of Information & Public Relations was created in 1969.

Started as weekly, the Calcutta Municipal Gazette was able to create important place in the society. It carried market price as a regular column. It got eminent people of the city as its contributor. The Gazette also carried the news of foreign municipalities. Mention should also be made about its circulation even beyond the territory of India. Amal Home mastered the ship till 1949. From the early 70’s the Gazette became monthly but gradually it became irregular and it was last published in 1995.

The Calcutta Municipal Corporation in the meanwhile felt the necessity of vernacular organ. From August 1978 publication of Bengali organ ‘Purosree’ came into existence. Prior to this few Bengali numbers were published in the name of Calcutta Municipal Gazette itself. Purosree is still a regular publication. From its genesis it mainly deals with important events and issues related to Kolkata. It also carries glimpses of municipal activities of the city. Besides publishing Purosree regularly the department also publishes special puja number and some commemorative numbers. Some collective volume of different write up of the Calcutta Municipal Gazette has also been published. Among them mention should be made about Tagore memorial number, Netaji Subhas birth centenary memorial number, C.V. Raman birth centenary memorial number, Jagadish Chandra Bose memorial number. The department also has released number of books in Bengali, Hindi and some documentaries ready for publicity and information dissemination. The Calcutta Municipal Corporation has its own press but it needs to be modernized and updated. It will be worth mentioning that the present circulation of Purosree is around 2000. It has to be noted further that the circulation of the special numbers are higher than the regular editions. The organ is mailed to all the councillors, editors of the newspaper, MPs and MLAs elected from Kolkata, the vice-chancellors of the Universities of the state and the eminent persons of the city.

The major responsibilities of the public relations activities have been taking care are of media relations, releasing advertisement, organizing programs on some important days, bringing out publication and maintain an information desk. A sales counter for the spread of the publications and documentaries has been opened from January 2009.

The release of advertisement has two parts: issue of tenders related to different areas of the organization is most regular and other areas of advertisements deal with informative and awareness provoking purpose. Common subjects of advertisement are tree plantation, communal harmony, consciousness against malaria disease and against wastage of water. The advertisements are released in print media. The department also releases advertisement in the little magazines as a mark of support. As outdoor media hoardings are used effectively by the department. Besides publicizing their own programs in hoardings, KMC also extends the support to the outer organizations by putting their information on hoardings if they have merit and relevance. The department issues press release if there is some important happening. The Mayor meets the press whenever it is necessary.

The department holds the grand occasion of civic felicitation offered to the people of repute as a token of honor. It may be recalled that among the Indian nationalists it was Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, was first offered such felicitation in the year 1924 by Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das. After that there are hardly any people of recognition who will not be found in that list till date.

KMC has many community halls and auditoriums. KMC has published a detailed report of such halls and auditoriums under their capacity building program with the help of Department of International Development, Government of United Kingdom. These community halls and auditoriums often help the community by providing space at much lower cost. KMC also plays instrumental role in maintenance of the historic Town Hall. The Town Hall is governed by Calcutta Museum Society, an autonomous body but KMC meets up all its major expenses. The library of the KMC previously was situated in its main building has now been shifted to Town Hall.

KMC face emergency situation on the rainy season. Malaria, Dengue and other vector borne diseases and water logging are the recurring problems of this season. Public Relations have to play sharp role during these periods. The department generally circulates leaflets, issue informative and awareness provoking advertisements in mass media and hoardings. There is a disaster management group in KMC but it needs infrastructural development for combating such situations effectively. In recent past the KMC use to issue the details of the development projects along with the tentative date of completion. The slogan is ‘keep track of our progresses.’ After the completion it has another insertion with the slogan – we have kept our words. This is conscious effort of managing perception and getting performance recognition.

E-Governance has been the latest feature of the KMC. The organization has been operating some treasuries and e-Kolkata citizen service centers. Citizens can deposit any tax or fees related to assessment, market or license of any area in these centers. The service is likely to be extended soon. The budget statement (2009-10) of the Mayor also states that tenders have been launched for web portal by which citizens will be able to get all municipal services from their home. The website (formerly [www.kolkatamycity.com](http://www.kolkatamycity.com) and presently [www.kmcgov.in](http://www.kmcgov.in) ) extensively offers information to the citizens. The use of website is on the rise and its role will be increasing in the future keeping pace with the tech-savvy new generation. One must mention that the organization must chalk out long term plan to use social media effectively to reach out the new generation as that form of media is gaining increasing popularity and main gateway of the netizens recently. Another important step should be initiated for more decentralized Public Relations activities and that is to develop infrastructure for Public Relations activities under Boroughs.

1. **INFERENCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Municipal Public Relations is becoming increasingly important with time. With the direction of decentralized development, role of community is gaining focus in local governments. In information-rich societies communities are expected to be participatory in that new role. It has changed the dimension of local governments especially the city councils and municipalities. Without much doubt it can be claimed that this participatory model can direct inclusive form of governance. As a modern tool of image management, the role of Public Relations cannot be ignored in the municipality functioning. Its role will only be increasing with time. As the Kolkata Municipal Corporation has been a Public Relations conscious body from a long period, it can set role model in the genre of Municipal Public Relations in Indian context.

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