

# Challenges of Handling Municipal Public Relations During COVID-19 Pandemic

Santwan Chattopadhyay\*

## Abstract:

*Public Relations (PR), a form of persuasive communication, has commonly been used to planned and sustained process of image management. With passing time PR has branched out its operation in view of requisition of different fields. Owing its genesis from Government Public Relations, Municipal Public Relations (MPR) has been coming out as specialized PR initiative for municipal bodies to reach out the citizens – disseminate their initiatives to the citizens along with intention of registering reciprocation to complete the participatory process. From the operation of the municipal bodies to how they want to be perceived by the citizens it focuses, undoubtedly, on the proximity. Now during this COVID- 19 pandemic this concept of proximity, especially in the operational measures of municipal bodies, needed serious intervention. The generally practiced municipal operation had to improvise heavily, so had to be done in the sphere of MPR. The crisis gave birth to a new challenge before the MPR which has to be objectively mapped for further theorization of the genre.*

**Keywords:** Public Relations, Government Public Relations, Municipal Public Relations, image, COVID- 19 pandemic

**Abbreviations used:** GPR = Government Public Relations, KMC = Kolkata Municipal Corporation, MPR = Municipal Public Relations, PR = Public Relations, PRSA = Public Relations Society of America.

## 1. Introduction to Public Relations

Public Relations (PR) is a 'deliberate, planned and sustained' (Black, 1996) form of persuasive communication which is used for building and maintaining image mainly of institution and sometimes even of the individuals for increasing its visibility and increasing chances of its favorable portrayal. Edward Louis Bernays pioneered the process of constructively defining the genre Public Relations in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Danny Griswold laid down it as "the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with public interest and executes a program of action to earn understanding and acceptance" (Reddi, 2009). Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) was founded in 1947 and it stated the definition of the genre as - 'PR helps an organisation and its publics adapt mutually to each other.' It further elaborated the objective of the discipline stating that PR is not mere business but it encompasses varied interests of different stakeholders.

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\*Associate Professor, Department of Adult, Continuing Education & Extension; Jadavpur University  
Email: [santwanchattopadhyay@yahoo.com](mailto:santwanchattopadhyay@yahoo.com)

To consolidate the definition of PR PRSA initiated a campaign entitled 'Public Relations Defined' in the year 2011. Their intention was to involve crowd sourcing method in the platform of their website. They posted a sentence in their website with blanks which was supposed to be filled up by the crowd. They uploaded "Public relations (does what) with or for (whom) to (do what) for (what purpose)." Total 927 reactions were registered and the definition which acclaimed winning position was "PR is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their bodies." One should note that the entire mechanism of PR looks at how the organization is being perceived by its stakeholders. So, proper identification of stakeholders is the pillar of success of PR mechanism. It can be mentioned further that as this identification of stakeholders has to be derived from the characteristics and operational purview of separate organizations it cannot be considered as stereotypical repetition of previous experiences. Segregating organization's own audience from the entire mass, therefore, acts as important aspect of PR. This focuses on tuning the scale of a chorus initiative with aspiration of converging them for a desired outcome.

## **2. Government Public Relations and Municipal Public Relations :**

One should not forget that PR cannot build up image from out of the world, it can, rather, intensify and magnify appearance of concerned organization in a favorable way among its stakeholders. PR, therefore, is also known as performance recognition. The process of PR follows the persuasive mode of communication with aim of registering positive feedback. The mechanism of PR has branched out to different sectors with specific appeals of those concerned sectors.

Municipal Public Relations (MPR) has branched out from the genre called Government Public Relations (GPR). GPR was conceived to represent the governmental activities to the citizens on one hand and on the other hand it presented a platform to record the voice of the citizens to create an endeavor so that people can take part in the policy making. The main focus of GPR has been to create and maintain create a favorable psychological climate for the citizens to make them feel that they are associated and involved with the cause of the governance. The PR mechanism in GPR identifies its definite role to bridge the government and the citizens. PR is as a purposive communication with emphasis toward the feedback of its stakeholders and in GPR Government aims at dissemination of its goals, policies, programmes and achievements to the citizens with a broader intention to constitute well informed citizenry to supplement democratic practices.

The main challenge of GPR is that it has to cater with highest possible cross sections of the society which is far more complex than extending PR mechanism for one particular institution or organization. GPR can be a potential communication mechanism to reach out to those vast publics to create a platform connecting them and the Government simultaneously. A

democratic endeavor can be best explored when mutual trust between Government and the citizens can be bridged and that is hardly possible without transparent dissemination of information which is a basic prerequisite of GPR. It can further formulate well informed relationship between the Government and the citizens.

Government Public Relations primarily deals with four point agenda – (i) disseminating public policies of the Government; (ii) spreading public information of importance; (iii) building and pursue of positive institutional image; and (iv) enthusing reciprocation from the citizens by generating feedback. The success of public policy communication depends on gathering sizable support for Government's policies and manifestation of that support needs initiatives in the local, national and sometimes even in international sector.

GPR has to perform regular responsibility of disseminating information to the citizens' centers primarily on their entitlement, general information on health, education, social welfare, agriculture, industry, public transportation, developmental information and so forth. The mechanisms mainly explored are announcement, press information, exhibition and advertisement; local group communication can also be a potential mode. Building up and pursuing a positive institutional image has a dual intention which has to be performed simultaneously. On one hand the support and confidence of the internal publics, mainly constituting with Government staff members, has to be guaranteed and on the other hand the support of the vast external publics, with huge heterogeneous aspirations, has to be won.

Municipal Public Relations (MPR) is known for the PR activities performed for Municipal Corporations. The principal purpose of this genre is to inform and educate the citizens on the operations and functioning of the Municipal Corporation and make the citizens enthused to mark their participation in the city governance. The major operational sphere, tools and mechanism of operation along with the broad understanding in MPR owes its genesis and similarity with GPR with its goals of the participatory city governance ensuring participation of the citizens. MPR, in that respect, acts as the bridge between the Municipal Corporation and its citizens.

Pan Dodd Wheeler has pioneered the theorization of the genre MPR through the article 'Municipal Public Relations' (1956) detailed the periphery of the genre which can be summarized from the words of the article itself - "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."

MPR plays vital role in increasing impact of civic administration by making a favorable environment for extending municipal services to the citizens in an amicable and reciprocal measure. The operation of a Municipal Government essentially is based on the primary needs

and aspirations of the city dwellers. One cannot ignore or forget the presence of the Municipal authority from issuance of birth certificate to obtaining death certificate. From the very early morning to late at night - municipalities have to cater with the basic necessities of urban people. The area of operation of the municipal authorities has also been fixed in a statutory mode. This diverse list containing basic necessities needs regular attention otherwise even slight deviation can cause dissatisfaction not only to one or two households but it can rapidly spread within the entire community. This is why the concept of MPR is gaining popularity for successful operation of city governance.

In the Indian context 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act has added structural and functional points of view in acknowledging urban Local Governance. The Act came into existence from June 1993. It has not only provided Constitutional status to the municipalities but also has brought them under justifiable part of the Constitution. The 12<sup>th</sup> schedule of the Constitution which has been connected with the Act has detailed eighteen broad functional areas within the purview of municipalities-

- (1) Urban planning, including town planning.
- (2) Regulation of land use and construction of buildings.
- (3) Planning for economic and social development.
- (4) Roads and bridges.
- (5) Water supply for domestic, industrial and commercial purposes.
- (6) Public health, sanitation, conservancy and solid waste management.
- (7) Fire services.
- (8) Urban forestry, protection of the environment and promotion of ecological aspects.
- (9) Safeguarding the interests of weaker section of society, including the handicapped and mentally retarded.
- (10) Slum improvement and up-gradation.
- (11) Urban poverty alleviation.
- (12) Provision of urban amenities and facilities such as parks, gardens, playgrounds.
- (13) Promotion of cultural, educational and aesthetic aspects.
- (14) Burials and burial grounds, cremations, cremation grounds and electric crematoriums.
- (15) Cattle ponds, prevention of cruelty to animals.
- (16) Vital statistics including registration of births and deaths.
- (17) Public amenities including street lighting, parking lots, bus stops and public conveniences.
- (18) Regulation of slaughter houses and tanneries.

Significant and increasing importance of MPR is not only confined to managing the image of the Municipal Government but it has definite role to play for formation of an environment where civic consciousness and citizens' participation in the civic affairs will be on the rise where people would look at the civic body as their own institution. The main operational purview of MPR is detailed below-

- It has to be instrumental for minimizing apathy of the public toward the civic body and convert it to a positive understanding.
- It must be pivotal to ensure popular support of the citizens for the policies and programs initiated by the municipal authority.
- It must ensure the process of informing and educating the citizens about details of the policies adopted by using all probable channels of communication so that the policies be appreciated and accepted by the citizens.
- It has to reach a mutual agreement among citizens and the elected municipal body by using available communication channels based on confidence and trust.
- It has to ensure transparency while sharing information about the municipal body's plans, policies and operations including use of public fund and future orientations to create the environment of credence and achieving long term support.
- It has to give special emphasis on communicating the developmental activities along with intervention related to social responsibility initiated by the municipal body.
- It has to focus on building living connectivity between the elected municipal body and the citizens cutting across the political division. It is important but hard to execute. Special attention should be given to establish the organizational image for long term gain curbing the tendencies like using the organization for political dividend of the elected section.
- It must focus to provide the citizens a platform for redressing of grievances which can ensure feeling of participation.
- It has to maintain healthy media relations with different media houses for better portrayal of the municipal information..
- It should prioritize conduction of innovative campaign with special emphasis of use of social media.
- It should not undermine the importance of insiders or the internal publics and should plan properly to empathize and make them feel enthused for better performance as

they are the representatives of the municipal body while facing the public and their performance can shape public perception about the civic body.

- It should planfully build up the capacity to manage adverse situations including crisis.

### **3. Municipal Public Relations during the Pandemic: Experience from Kolkata:**

Here we can locate the principal contradiction with the philosophy of MPR with the prevalent real situation which is identified as crisis situation according to the understanding of the subject goes. The prerequisite of the success of municipal operation depends on close proximity between the service providers and its receivers. But the concept of social distancing, though the spirit speaks of physical distancing during COVID-19 pandemic has appeared as both physical and psychological barrier in the municipal operation as well as MPR initiatives. Crisis can be defined as a moment of danger or suspense, which can do serious harm, if not resolved in time. (Sachdeva, 2009) Handling this contradiction has therefore been the principal responsibility of MPR in present time.

In a crisis situation some signs are predominant-

- Matter of surprise is developed.
- Collection or dissemination of information becomes insufficient.
- Lot of events escalates in quick succession.
- Controlling the situation becomes hard.
- Outside scrutiny or inquisitive visit increases certainly.
- Mindset of the shareholders becomes defensive.
- An element of panic develops among the stakeholders.

Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC), one of the leading municipal bodies in the country with rich heritage of municipal communication can be viewed in this perspective to draw instances how the municipal communication is being adapted and improvised during this unprecedented hour of crisis.

PR tools which they use commonly are mostly being used during this period also but the focus has obviously shifted and the content has accordingly been improvised with the changing scenario when their prime focus has been to fight out these manifestations of the pandemic.

The fortnightly Bengali organ of KMC 'Kolkata Puroshree' has played important role in dissemination of information which the citizens need most during this kind of crisis. But it somewhat lacked in regular publication and the unprecedented character of the crisis has certainly imposed severe impact on its circulation also. But the online presence of the organ has helped to keep control on its visibility when it is needed most. As now it seems that the crisis

would going to be long drawn it has to play a long term role by bringing forward introspective write ups on this situation. The organ should further utilize its news section to register the efforts of the civic body to stand by the citizens during this hard time, and must continue harping on the awareness issue for better future and highlight the positivity to defeat the gloomy endeavor.

The website of KMC is a storehouse of information and it has played positive and meaningful role as good source of primary information, awareness advisories. It has transmitted webinar also to increase the level of awareness to fight out the pandemic. Online payment of municipal services could be transacted through this platform which became so important during this pandemic.

Social media mainly its facebook page gave all updates of the institutional initiations, support of the citizens and non government bodies to aware the citizens and their services to sanitize public places especially the market places. This portrayal of mutual attempt to protect civic wellness not only disseminated positive message but this positive spirit could be shared and multiplied helping the embedded characteristic of the social media platform. The page has prioritized its flagship campaign for last few months entitled 'Talk to Mayor' which focuses on modern outlook of PR mechanism of reaching out to the community with intention of creating long lasting emotional impact on the citizens that the authority is easily accessible. As even the civic body election could not be conducted due to the pandemic and the Board of Administrators was appointed by the state Government and the person who was the Mayor took charge as the Chairman of the said Board of Administrators. The name of the flagship campaign promptly was changed to 'Talk to KMC.' It speaks of alertness of mind which also is a signature of successful PR initiatives. Another important campaign launched during this time deals with tele-advice by the empanelled physicians along with phone number for getting ambulance. The information has been presented through an attractive poster, so it was also multiplied through messaging applications like WhatsApp. This initiative of standing by the citizens is another example of proper MPR intervention.

Interpersonal communication played important role as the staff members had to visit the residences of the citizens. It has been a regular practice to offer services like primary health or vector control. Now as the situation demanded those went to less important priorities and collecting information of whether people having indications of virus attack and providing information about fever center or collecting garbage with proper prevention along with passing information of nearby clinics became the issues of priority to shape image of the municipal body.

#### 4. Conclusion:

As crisis is perceived as an unpredictable major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization, industry or stakeholders, proper handling of that adverse reality determines the class of PR campaign. It involves rearrangement in order of prioritization of the issues with quickness and swiftness. MPR cannot be an exception and has to planfully exercise it to get its presence registered among the stakeholders for maintaining organizational credibility.

PR mechanism in KMC is mainly a centralized affair. The administration has been decentralized but nit the PR mechanism. The pandemic has explored the necessity of decentralized approach of PR mechanism to counter the escalating events during crisis. It has further explored the capacity building of the workers who meet the citizens directly to improve their communication mode to register positive perception about the civic body. The presence of the organization has to be prioritized by planning logo exhibit or planning uniform may contribute further benefit to the civic body to register their presence by the citizens in the hard time. And good experience of hard time lasts long.

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