

Reinvent PR Through The Golden Triangle

- Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao

(Chairman, the Centre for Media Studies, New Delhi Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao delivered an epoch making keynote address at the National Conference on Professionalism and Ethics in Public Relations organised by the Global Forum for Public Relations and Media Wing, Brahma Kumaris in Hyderabad. Here is an extract of his speech.)

This initiative of Brahma Kumaris and Global Forum for PR will go a long way in refurbishing the standing of PR. This meet is timely. Coming together of three streams - BKs, PR practitioners and Dr. CVN Reddi, will open a new window. People like Dr. C V N Reddi, with passion, are too few today; But there is no role-modelling in the ranks of PR. The media wing of Rajyoga Education and Research Foundation of BK is doing pioneering work. President of this Forum, B K Karunabhai of course is spreading spiritualism via broadcasting

This Global Forum should become an influential force, nationally, with sensitising effect on the very functioning of PR. This initiative has the potential to elevate PR into a profession, and a respected one at it. But that is possible only when PR acquires certain hallmark of its own and gains in stature of a profession.

According to Dr C. V. Narasimha Reddi "PR is a public

communication function based on public interest. As such its practitioners have responsibilities to speak to the greater good, whether we like it or not....". He further asserts that "Truth is the essence of PR practice". An ideal statement, very good intent. It is true, that is the essence

of "professionalism". But, how far that is the reality today?. How many PR practitioners think alike, agree with such an intent and also are practising. Such an intent implies reinventing and repositioning of PR as a profession - which Dr. Reddi believes it is. He is an idealist. Wish there are more such sane voices in the ranks of PR.

Credo of PR

"Golden Triangle" approach, the theme of this Conference, has the potential to achieve such a fete. This National Conference should deliberate how Golden Triangle principle could get adopted, could be incorporated and becomes the credo of PR. The "Golden Triangle" concept is very unique, with universal appeal and eternal value- for every sphere of public life. That is - professionalism,

ethics and spirituality as inseparable features. Particularly in the context of PR.



Dr. Bhaskara Rao seen delivering the keynote address

Ethics

Professionalism and ethics are in fact two sides of the same coin. No field could be said professional without having certain ethical concerns and without being based on such values. What is ethics?. In my understanding four characteristics are inherent in ethics. These are: (a) concern for society, (b) concern with long term implications, (c) interest in the larger good and (d) based on eternal humane values.

How Professional is PR ?

When the theme is professionalism and ethics, the need is honest self analysis, critical appraisal and even questioning about what and where PR is heading today. Such a stock taking is inherent in the very

concept of professionalism and the very purpose of meets like this. When this kind of *sangam* takes place, it is a rare opportunity for PR. My association with PR - goes back to 1975, Vigyan Bhawan conference.

Public relations in my opinion is more an executive function; professionalism is not always evident in all functions and careers, including in the case of PR. What is that we can describe in public relation as a profession and when we could say a PRO as a professionalist ?.

Negating Tendencies

There are certain negating tendencies in the very functioning of PR today. For, what was public contact or reaching out during the lifetime of Vivekananda or Mahatma Gandhi and what is practiced today as PR are altogether different in the scope, intent, approach and methodology.

The dilemma in this regard are:

- ❖ First, in the very objectives. More often, PR is a conflict or crisis response function. Because PR is not an independent or stand alone function, it is more often a supportive service or an executive function. Seldom it is self driven - with exceptions. Like Hare Rama Hare Krishna, Brahma Kumaris are also PR people. But they work with passion, mission, voluntarily chosen. Are PR functionaries today in that category?.

Further, PR is more often commercially driven, mostly by corporate interests, it is less community or citizen centric; it caters more for the greeds of a few; not the needs of many?. Can this ever be reversed or even corrected?.

- ❖ Secondly, the very scope of PR. It is more often temporal in its scope of work. Its functioning is more informal, adhoc and even arbitrary. The PROs of yester years were concerned with long term interests, durable changes and societal values and sustaining them. How about today?. Think about.

- ❖ Thirdly, what kind of self imposed discipline is there in the functioning of PR - individually or together?. What kind of ethical standards are perceived, practiced; self imposed and willingly followed?. Not as isolated instances!

- ❖ Fourthly, what kind of transparency practices are there in the functioning of PR and what kind of accountability procedures, including for redressal, are followed?. How many examples could be cited?.

- ❖ Fifthly, what could be described as professional standards of PR?. Are there any commonly promoted and followed codes, manuals, benchmarks and measurements. If so, what kind of compliance is there?.

- ❖ Sixthly, what are the criteria or yardsticks on which PR functioning and operations are judged against ?. Do we have many case studies for this?.

Media Relations

How much of public relations is actually "media relations" or "news management" ? Mass media are supportive, not substitute for performance - as is assumed or implied more often in PR. This is not to say media has no power, but with moral power, it multiplies and become more effective. The extreme of this view is that PR is panacea for societal or corporate ills. The assumption being that information would resolve conflicts. If that is the case, we would have not got into many dilemmas today.

All this however, should not mean that PR has no distinct role of its own or that it has no significance. In which case we would not have come together this evening for this serious conference. As you are all, I am equally interested in PR being respected for its professionalism.

Public Opinion

Primary concern of PR is with opinions - opinions of a given public on a given issue or subject and at a given point of time. Public opinion is meant to influence specified publics or public policies and priorities of specific publics in specific contexts. The PR, from its origins, has been dedicated to the "management of the public views", not in building relationships. But then, one could

say, that this is also a basic premise of all democracies. That is all the more reason why we should see that PR becomes a respected profession. That perception of potential perhaps is what lead to PR receiving unprecedented boost today.

Perceptions about PR

What are the general perceptions about PR?. These include: PR caters to the interests of "vested interests" and is a "pro-establishment" service or function; The sole objective of PR is "to influence" public opinions so that public policies could be molded to some ones private or corporate advantage, even if it is at the disadvantage of many; And that, as a function, PR is interested with the ends, not with the process and the means. Do not we want to address such perceptions in conferences like this.

Three pronged initiatives Golden Triangle

Let me now suggest three pronged efforts to restore PR to a mission mode and into a course of professionalism.

First, the very concept of PR and repositioning. This Golden Triangle approach to PR - professionalism, ethics and spirituality - should become national agenda and a movement. BKs can do. Only they can. BKs are already doing it - for 70 years. This requires specific initiatives. One, promote this very concept - that PR is not a panacea and that it is only a strategy, not a solution or

substitute for performance. Second, PR does not operate in isolation. Its standing and professionalism is linked to the kind of priorities, practices and values of other related functionaries in a democracy - for example, the very political system, the media and advertising, etc. Professionalism in one should reflect on the professionalism of the other activity. This linkage need to be worked on in tandem and for a win-win outcome. Third, public good criteria being an ethical value; it should be adopted as an endeavour of PR and it should also be evident in the priorities.

Public Service

Second, certain suo-moto (pro-active) public services/ functions need to become part of PR towards restoring credibility of PR as a profession and that it is not merely a crisis time job. But a relationship building effort, a service to help people, customers, consumers and other stakeholders. In this process, corporate bosses themselves need to be motivated to take initiatives. BK should organize this kind of programmes together with the "big bosses", it is they who set the agenda for PR. Is it not?

Education

Third, on the education front. Syllabus of PR courses all across needs a relook, standardization and support with case studies. The concept outlined in the brochure of this Conference could be

incorporated. But, before that could be expected, this Indian "Association for Values and Ethics in PR" need to be expanded as a national movement to include many other groups from civil society, spiritual world, corporates and the bureaucracy. What defines and distinguish PR should be values that it cherishes and relies on, not its tactics. PR people unfortunately are too fragmented divided now to pursue such a course. They are supposed to be jodnewala not thodnewala.

Lastly, a word of caution. The globalization process has challenging implications. The influx of corporate PR leaders and take over of "Indian PR" (with Govt. allowing 100% FDI) is working on an altogether different wave length. Can we address this issue in isolation? We need to work for a paradigm shift. Without a "healing touch" of Conference like this, or by "magazines" like the *Public Relation Voice* of Dr. Reddi, we will not achieve such a shift in the very paradigm of PR.

In conclusion I would like to say that clearing misperceptions, inducting ethical sensibilities, revamping PR education, and adopting of public service concerns - as a part of ongoing PR endeavour - is what we need to work for. Only on such criteria, we should appraise PR for its professional standing. With BKs taking this initiative, this conference is a good beginning.