

The Antiquity of Public Relations in South Asia: A Historical Perspective on the Evolution of Public Relations in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Applying a historical lens, this article describes public relations presence from ancient to modern times in Pakistan. The article is based on a descriptive analysis of the available literature of public relations scholarship in Pakistan. Pakistan inherited public relations from British colonial powers and early growth of the field in the country is widely affected by this legacy. Later, post modernistic traditions and globalizations created its impact on the patterns of professional recognition and maturity of the profession of public relations. Although the field has evolved professionally in Pakistan, but the craft PR practices are still on the rise as compare professional practices that hold a less share in public sector but witness a major portion of practice prominently in private sector corporations.

Key Words: History of PR, PR in South Asian Region & British Legacy of PR

Introduction

There is not much literature available on the historical perspectives of public relations in Pakistan. The analysis of the available literature reflects that history of public relations is not enough chronicled in Pakistan particularly and in the region of South Asia in general. Available historical records trace the historical evolution of public relations in subcontinent region from “Ashoka Dynasty” period, approximately 2000 years earlier. A system of official reporters and preservation of royal verdicts on rock edicts were initiated by the “Emperor Asoka” or public information purposes. The historians believe this system of public information to be the early fundamentals of public relations scholarship in South Asian region (Singh, 2000; Avari, 2016).

As per historical and modern records, the evolution and progression of public relations in Pakistan is spread over a span of three distinctive stages. These stages/phases have nomenclatures as propaganda phase that constituted the most

ancient period to the end of Mughal rule, the middle phase constituted the British rule in the subcontinent and the last period started from the establishment of Pakistan in 1947. The propaganda phase is the first phase and it ranges the most ancient period extended from 1500 BC to the early nineteen Century. A realistic public information system was present in the “Indus River Civilization” period as reflected by different archeological sites in different areas of Pakistan. During “Indus River Civilization” period royal triumphs and verdicts are used to publicize by means of imprinted rocks and erected monuments. Similarly, public relations and public information systems were present in “the Mauryan and Gupta” empires times. These ancient empires also used systems of carved rocks and stones to inform common public about imperial happenings. System of enduring scribes and transcribers was established during the period of “Muslim Dynasties” to share and inform the general public across the reign about official proceeding of the crown (Singh, 2000; Khan, 2001; Pochhaamer, 1981; Qureshi, I. H., 1977).

The fall of Mughals and the rise British Empire gave birth of the middle phase (1858-1947) of public relations in the subcontinent. This phase brought inclusion of western practices of public relations. A system of publicity and public information was initiated and institutionalized by the British at each province of the subcontinent. To counter enemy propaganda during World War II, the British also established a public relations cell in military named Inter Services Public Relations. Further, British government started two more departments for public information purposes including “Press information Department and the Department of Advertising, Films and Publication”. The third phase constitutes the modern period after the establishment of Pakistan (Singh, 2000; Khan, 2001; Pochhaamer, 1981; Qureshi, I. H., 1977).

The aspect of colonial heritage is a dominant factor in the development PR apparatus in Pakistan and thus the evolution of western practices in public relations in Pakistan is seen as part of British legacy. Thus, post-colonial practices affected the growth of public relations scholarship in the country even during early postmodernism period of eighties. These post-colonial traditions were dominant for almost four decades after the independence of Pakistan. But later, emerging economic globalization patterns started creating its impact on the professional practice of public relations in Pakistan during the decade of nineties and at the start of the new century (Halff & Gregory, 2014). The British as a colonial power were governing subcontinent before 1947. The scholars and public relations professionals opined dichotomous arguments while describing the roots of the field in this region. Some scholars observed the phenomenon of public relations developing as a parallel to the other historical developments and its origin is rooted back to many centuries. But others believed that professional growth of public relations in Pakistan and “South Asian” region is linked with the modernism and postmodernism structures after the partition of subcontinent in 1947 (Singh, 2000; Bardhan, 2009).

Some scholars related public relations scholarship in South Asia with nation building course. Halff & Gregory (2014) discovered more than ninety

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historiographies of PR in areas of Asia Pacific and South Asia. They concluded that public relations development in these regions is linked with firmness of people confederacy and nationalism. Thus, the public relations development patterns in Pakistan also accumulate with the patterns of PR development in the whole region. The British were benefiting from public relations apparatus in the subcontinent as part of the bureaucratic structure from the beginning of the twentieth century. The basic objective for founding public relations set up was to rationalize and manage the public opinion necessary to smoothly govern the region. The British established “Central Bureau of Public Information” in 1923. This bureau altered its name as “Press Information Bureau” (Singh, 2000; Bardhan, 2009). The same bureau set up was inherited to Pakistan at its independence. The Press Information Bureau played its role in unifying and strengthening the newly born nation. Several factors affected the growth of public relations in Pakistan. These factors included frail democratic traditions, weak institutional honor, greater economic helplessness, enormous globalization and incompatible media autonomy with societal and organizational structures. Pakistan inherited a departmental structure of public relations function at regional level which was insufficient for the federal government. Information department was thus, established at the Federal Capital also. The growth of the public relations field was not smoothly sustainable due to undemocratic traditions of the government. This posed a key obstacle in gaining professional maturity of the field in the country (Khan, 2001; Zahid, M., 1971; Mukhtar M., 2019).

Institutional development of public relations

Since its creation, there had been a sheer scarcity of public relations experts in Pakistan. Majority of the professionals chose India due to their religious affiliation being Hindus. The government prioritized the creation and consolidation of PR sections initially. The provincial public relations departments were consolidated, and the government established “Press Information Department” at the center. Then “Radio Pakistan and Department of Advertising, Film and Publications” were also launched to accomplish obligatory information for interrelated responsibilities of the new state. The succeeding governments further expanded this information infrastructure and established “Internal and External Publicity Wings” (Masood, A., 2017; Zahid, M., 1971). “Internal Publicity and PR contained Press Information Department, Directorate of Electronic Media and Publications, Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation, Pakistan Television Corporation, Shalimar Recording and Broadcasting Company, Associated Press of Pakistan, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority, Information service Academy, Pakistan National Centre and Directorate of Research and Reference (Masood, A., 2017)”.

Press Information Department publicizes the activities, projects, events and developments related to Federal government of Pakistan. It also publicizes the day to day activities of the Prime Minister and his Federal Cabinet. These obligations include media management, handling and tracking, organizing news conferences, practicing public affairs, planning and executing campaigns on state matters and manufacturing the opinion of the general public (Masood, A., 2017).

Tasks of “Directorate of Electronic Media and Publications” include exposing documentaries on government plans and activities, arranging displays, networking with authors/writers and articulating state media policy for electronic media. Responsibilities of Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation (Radio Pakistan) and Pakistan Television Corporation incorporate transmission of Islamic philosophy and national harmony, reflecting unbiased information about government schemes and amusing general public. The primary news agency of Pakistan, Associated Press of Pakistan was launched as a trust and then altered into a corporation. The news creed of APP is being used by all print and electronic media in Pakistan. “Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority” was launched in 2002 to control private satellite media channels. Information Service Academy assists in training of officers of the Information Group and organizes capacity building courses of public relations for mid-career practitioners in public sector. “External Publicity Wing” was formed with the purpose of promulgating state plans overseas and ratifying positive national image by offering exposure to culture and heritage of Pakistan (Masood, A., 2017).

Public relations function was not paid much consideration by the homegrown private-sector organizations in Pakistan. Later, the contribution of public relations for industrial relations purposes was comprehended by the big industrial units. But unfortunately, this comprehension did not pass on to medium and small-scale firms. Public relations was espoused by private sector a bit later comparing to public-sector in Pakistan. But the professional development of public relations in private organizations is much better and speedy as compare to public institutions. The reflections of transnational firms/organizations on local companies is one of the major reasons behind this comparative professional maturity and acknowledgement. But on the other hand, there are very few industrial units that have inhouse PR setups. Most of the private companies in Pakistan outsource their PR tasks (Masood, A., 2017).

The conditions of public relations in Pakistan was not reasonable and realistic till fifties. Very few institutions owned public relations department. Pakistan Postal Services, National Bank of Pakistan, Pakistan Railways and Hamdard Foundation were pioneers in possessing an inhouse PR unit. Sixties proved to be a productive decade for public relations scholarship in Pakistan. The organizations those started their inhouse PR units included “Pakistan International Airlines, State Bank of Pakistan, Pearl continental Hotel and Punjab Small Industries (Khan, 2001)”.

Media industry in Pakistan experienced radical changes after the rise of cross media ownership patterns during the first decade of the 21st century. These vertical

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media atmospheric changes provided better prospects for the public relations scholarship in Pakistan to thrive well in terms of professional maturity and acknowledgement/recognition in an eastern society like Pakistan. public relations are not a window casing now in Pakistan, but it can be seen as an imperative and substantial portion of organizational plans and actions. Almost majority of the departments either public or private own their public relations apparatus in the present scenario to compete pulsating media clout in Pakistan. From the nineties, public relations industry in Pakistan started more recognition and at the end of second decade of this new century, public relations is largely recognized by organizations across the country either public or private. Public relations apparatus exists with varying nomenclature in organizations and corporations in Pakistan, but the essence of its strategies revolves round media management and image building purposes (Mukhtar, M., 2019).

The professional development of the field in Pakistan can be seen in the light of “Excellence theory” (Grunig et al., 2013). Exploring professional application of models in PR industry in Pakistan, it is concluded that symmetrical models are less practices and thus, Pakistan PR industry lacks high standard professionalism yet. Although some organizations are applying symmetrical models, but this number is fewer to compare with international professional standards (Mukhtar, M., 2019; Khan, 2001). Majority of the institutions in Pakistan are not employing public relations with its holistic scope and progressive direction and thus benefiting less from PR activities. Media is considered as the prominent publics to be taken care of on a scale of priority in Pakistan and public relations consultants are used to involve in sending news releases most of their time.

Growth of political public relations in Pakistan

The contribution of public relations in the political progression is also valuable. Since its creation, political parties and persons are benefiting from public relations tools/activities in their political campaigning process. But involvement of public relations in political communication in Pakistan generally revolves around activities included media relations purposes and political advertising. Political persons and entities never applied public relations on scientific scales to smoothen public opinion rather they did apply PR communication strategies on a one-way track with poor feedback mechanism (Khan, 2001; Masood, A., 2017).

Public relations is recognized as an important feature of the existing communication scene (Karlberg, 1996). One of the foremost challenges in Pakistani PR industry is the survival within frail democratic norms. Thus, when it is finding its own place for recognition, it becomes difficult for public relations to support democratic norms to thrive well (Khan, 2001).

The changing media scenario of development of so many satellite channels in Pakistan has threatened political and other institutions to employ public relations apparatus excessively. Thus, public relations departments within political system “(The National Assembly, The Senate, Government Ministries and their allied departments)” need to officiate their role between media and democratic entities in Pakistan. The role of public relations in democracy is recognized as a feeding

mechanism to deal with the media for management of media coverage by applying political public relations based on research-oriented communication policies. The conceptions of civil society and public sphere are largely argued while discussing the involvement of public relation in democracy (Davis, 2000; Hiebert, 2005; Raupp, 2004; Taylor & Doerfel, 2005).

Developing nations including Pakistan are employing public relations to nurture and promulgate democratic culture by exploiting the authority of core forces of social capital and vibrant civil society (Sommerfeldt, 2013). Though, it is very difficult to examine the communicative frameworks of public relations within explicit phenomenon of democracy, but some scholars have recommended this capacity building role of public relations by linking the troika of public sphere, social capital and civil society (Davis, 2000; Raupp, 2004; Hiebert, 2005; Willis, 2012).

Public relations create an atmosphere of reciprocal engagement and trust between institutions and people within a society. Thus, public relations boosts the construction of social capital and subsequently provides the nitty-gritties of launching a vibrant civil society. A vibrant civil society verbalizes public sphere by means of the potential of interior factors for a vigorous democratic debate to occur. The Media institutions in Pakistan are playing very important role for an active affiliation between civil society and public sphere. The critical public relations activists prominently using social media in Pakistan to support public sphere to criticize trust deficit among society, government and institutions (Mukhtar, M., 2019). The public relations acquire the role of media relations by placing an information feeding mechanism between media and democratic institutions through timely information exchange and cooperation (social capital) and thus helps democracy to sustain and prosper (Botan & Taylor, 2005; Sommerfeldt, 2013). Government institutions in Pakistan are in dire need of a professional public relations apparatus to rationalize the influence of government plans on common people and to guide management hierarchies for adjusting their plan in better interest of the people.

Public relations infrastructure within political system in Pakistan requires skilled and qualified manpower, appropriate budget provisions, specialized atmosphere and research-based set-up to achieve their functional power well to support democracy in Pakistan. PR professional in Pakistan should also need to abstain pseudo political philosophies and correspondingly, they need to apply theories of public relations in strategic communication goals and also require considering socio-economic conditions (Mukhtar, M., 2019; Kruckeberg, 1995-96).

Public relations education and training in Pakistan

Several factors affected the educational development of public relations in Pakistan. These factors are deficiency of academic openings, improper training services and accessible study and research resources of the discipline. Exploring different records, it was found that only ten books and fifty-three research dissertations/theses were written on the topic of public relations till the start of the new millennium (Mukhtar, M., 2019). Almost all journalism, mass communication and communication studies departments are teaching public relations courses but a separate exclusive graduate degree in public relations is not being offered by any

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university in Pakistan. “Federal Information Academy” is the only professional education and training institution of the field in Pakistan but it is for information probationers only. The legacy of personal experiences is dominant in the field in Pakistan rather academic or research-oriented education and training (Khan, 200; Masood, A., 2017).

Professional organizations of public relations in Pakistan

The first professional organization of public relations in Pakistan was founded in 1964 with the name of Pakistan Public Relations Society (PPRS). The objectives behind foundation of this organization were multifold including provision of chances of professional growth to its members, initiating different courses of public relations pedagogy in Pakistani universities, creation of a discourse of the field by arranging of national and international seminars and conference, consolidation of foreign scholarships for professionals and students, establishment of a public relations and media university and catalyzation of the struggle for professional recognition of the field (Khan, 2001; Mukhtar, M., 2019).

Another organization with the name of Public Relations Association of Pakistan (PRAP) was also founded Islamabad in early eighties. This association also initiated a research journal of public relations, but this association was active till early nineties (Masood, A., 2017). The only positive impact of this association was generation of literature of the field by publishing some useful articles reflecting the plight of the field in Pakistan. At times, there is not any professional organization in Pakistan to provide professional umbrella for professionals of the field in Pakistan (Mukhtar, M., 2019).

Conclusion

Public relations industry in Pakistan holds a British legacy which has been transformed into professional recognition and maturity with the passage of time especially in wake of postmodern traditions and globalization of the world. Although public relations legacy in Pakistan restricted the professionals to work as press agents during first four decades but later decades observed a shift in professional practices in terms of volume, scope and professional maturity. The craft PR practices are still on the rise, but professional practices are also witnessed in some organizations prominently in private sector corporations. The public relations feeding mechanism of political and other institutions is not highly professional to compete vibrant media clutter, but it tends to approach to play a role in creating a democratic bond (Masood, A., 2017; Mukhtar, M., 2019).

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