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RE-SETTING INDIA'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

KISHAN S RANA

On 10 December 2010, while inaugurating a two-day conference hosted by the ministry of external affairs (MEA) on 'Public Diplomacy in the Information Age', Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao declared that Indian public diplomacy (PD) had been 're-set' in 2009. That was a graceful way of acknowledging that it is now on track in addressing the 'publics' who are its core targets, both at home and abroad. Of necessity, that involves reaching out to non-official institutions and agents that shape public opinion, be it think tanks, the media, academic institutions, civil society or a range of other non-official actors, including business. How well is this working? The practice of PD is much older than its name. Many of the practices of statecraft that Kautilya recommends to the king in his classic, *Arthashastra*, involve deliberate effort to mould public opinion in the king's favour, vis-à-vis his own subjects, and in dealing with adversaries. Leaders of all ages have understood the value of carrying with them public opinion at home; contemporary PD engenders realisation of the utility of reaching out to foreign audiences through varied methods, beyond overt propaganda.

In the practice of diplomacy, the key contribution of PD is in making governments aware of, first, the importance of actors other than the state entities that are typically the object of classic inter-state communication. Second, efforts to reach out to these multiple stakeholders that influence inter-state relations in different ways also lead us to the conclusion that domestic and external outreach have many similarities, and that it is practical to cover both these targets in our PD activities (some PD experts are not fully in agreement and hold that domestic audiences are addressed through 'public relations' and not PD; in the US a 1948 law prohibits the government from targeting home publics). Third, by the same token, we realise how much of the work of a modern foreign ministry has to take into account varied domestic constituencies, official and non-official.

In 2010, MEA has commenced use of social media tools of Web 2.0, and now features on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the like, with a modest but growing following; most probably, it is the first Indian ministry to step into these waters. This is all to the good, part of our learning experience with modern outreach. But we seem to hesitate in taking the logical follow-up; for instance, we are not yet decided on whether to permit officials to blog. This will perhaps happen before long, but we also seem to have issues with the deeper question of reaching out to domestic stakeholders. For instance, MEA has no regular mechanism for dialogue with non-state actors, and does not even seem convinced that it needs such a mechanism.

The other key activity that is missing in India is a sustained way of looking at image, and ‘managing’ this through a broad national public-private partnership with the many agencies that determine the way our country is perceived overseas. Consider the following: n Our tourism marketing slogan ‘Incredible India’ has been a resounding success. But no one has made any effort to piggyback on that with a good business marketing or investment promotion effort — in fact, no such slogan or concentrated effort exists. That is not to say that bodies such as the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (Ficci) do not engage in external marketing activities, but this lacks focus. Compare that with Thailand, whose tourism slogan is ‘Amazing Thailand’. Bangkok has now coined a shrewd business slogan: ‘Think Asia, Invest Thailand’.

Some of India’s 100-odd — an amazing number! — 24-hour news channels now stream their broadcasts live on the internet. This is welcome and deserves encouragement, as a real expression of soft power. Doordarshan might do the same, to reach out to a global audience, and in so doing, also improve its offering. Remember, China has just launched a global satellite TV channel — should we also not think in such terms? Over 250,000 Indians study in foreign countries, with 100,000 just in the US. In contrast, we receive only about 25,000 foreign students in India. China has over 170,000 foreign students, not a bad number for a society that is not democratic and is even closed in several respects. A basic problem is that no Indian agency ‘owns’ or sponsors the case for attracting more foreign students to India. Educating foreign students is a useful way of earning foreign exchange and creating jobs; it is also a powerful way of building lasting connections, and part of soft power. We seem to have forgotten that the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), created in 1950, has always had a special mandate to look after foreign students in India. Should not MEA adopt this ‘orphan’ and push the case for attracting more foreign students to the country? True, a bill is pending in Parliament to facilitate private sector initiatives in the field of education and regulate collaboration with foreign institutions. It is the private universities that hold out the best hope for attracting new streams of foreign students, if we look to the experience of Manipal (60 per cent of whose students are from overseas), Amity, Thapar University and others. But that too needs a push. MEA could take the initiative.

One contribution of the December 2010 conference was in sensitising Indian opinion, including the media, on how PD works. It drew about 200 participants, and was addressed by scholars and practitioners of this métier, from home and overseas. Hopefully it will leave some traces with them on the value of PD activities, and the complexities of managing it well, in a world dominated by communication overload.

What India needs is a ‘public diplomacy board’, along the lines of what exists in France and the UK, where foreign ministries bring together independent agencies that deal with image issues in their regular work remit. For India this would

include agencies handling tourism promotion, the official and private media, business and industry promotion, the public and private education sectors, and others, to work out a shared broad strategy and possible harmonised actions. Of course, this will not be easy, but on the plus side we have a foreign secretary who understands well the importance of the media and image, and is committed to advancing PD. Establishing such a regular discussion forum would also bring to MEA the perspectives of these partners in working out effective PD activities, and expose MEA to the rich experiences of non-state actors.

The author is a former diplomat. kishanrana@gmail.com