

From Muckraking to Metaverse: 100 years of public relations education – learning for India

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Executive Summary

India, the 5th largest economy in the world, started its liberalization journey in 1991. In the 40th year post-liberalisation – 2030 - there are changes in the offing for India. By 2030, the Indian economy is expected to emerge as the 3rd largest in the world. On the internal front, the pre-liberalisation generation will all have retired from the workforce: it will be the post liberalisation generation at the helm. This generation, unlike their predecessors, are globally exposed and aligned, unhindered by the predicaments of a controlled economy.

If by 2030, so much change is expected for the country, how prepared are the public relations practitioners and academia for this upcoming transition?

The study 'From Muckraking to Metaverse: 100 years of Public Relations education – learning for India' aims to understand the key developments of last 100 years that impacted public relations education. Based on this understanding, the study aims to frame learning areas that helps practitioners align to dealing with the emerging scenario for the country.

Using qualitative, in-depth interview methodology, the study takes a multi-stakeholder perspective – academicians, PR practitioners (20+ years work experience), observers (editors/writers) and office bearers of PR associations.

These interviews were based on seven themes identified in a literature review, to identify the elements that led to the growth and evolution of the public relations practice in developed economies. The PR curriculum of the top four institutes offering PR courses was analysed. These institutes were identified by non-academic respondents of the study, as 'reputed' or from where talent is hired. Three of these institutes are based in Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru - the three large markets for PR in India. One institute is located in Pune (near Mumbai).

While the challenges to PR – professional status, identity, etc. in India, remain similar to developed economies, there are silver linings. This report touches on those emerging opportunities.



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Introduction

It would be folly to assume that an Indian Rockefeller would be better than the American Rockefeller – Mahatma Gandhi

The story of Rockefeller is intrinsically linked to the growth of modern-day public relations practice. It is one of the pivotal triggers in the move from the public-be-damned phase to the public-be-informed phase for American businesses and society in the early 20th century. Central to this transition were investigative journalists dubbed as 'muckrakers'.

Fast forward to current times. While the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared loneliness as a global health threat, there is a Metaverse evolving – immersive, virtual, connected – providing a platform for newer bonding, experiences, shopping, leisure, health-care, education and a virtual world. Social media and digital rule the roost for information dissemination and access by citizens. Mass media, controlled by media houses, faces competition from 'individual' influencers with mass following on social media. Artificial Intelligence (AI) poses unique challenges. Disinformation and misinformation emerge as key concern areas for communicators.

The muckraking, by journalists, of early twentieth century set in motion the process of alignment and adjustment between organisations and their stakeholders. It is not just about profiteering today, but newer dimensions of reputation like ESG, Diversity & Inclusion, climate change, the gig economy, policy changes, etc. This coupled with emerging technologies, a virtual world of Metaverse, the challenges of identity theft, impersonation, deep fakes, etc. is to be the way of life for PR practitioners today and in the future.

Finance is now fintech; health is health-tech; medical is med-tech: is it time for PR-tech? The PR practitioner of the future may need to move technology adoption from just monitoring and content generation, to driving the narrative in the virtual world, based on an understanding of technology.

Public Relations in India

Twenty-two official languages; 833 million internet users; 197 million TV homes; 900 private satellite TV stations – around half dedicated to news; 17,000 newspaper titles; a cumulative newspaper circulation of over 400 million¹; a mobile phone subscriber base of over 1 billion...this is the media universe of India. Author Ruchir Sharma in his book 'Breakout Nations' (2012), advises marketers to think of India as 'United States of Europe', based on the complexity of dealing with wide cultural variations across the different states of the country.

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12557390>



Since independence in 1947, India adopted a unique mixed-economy model, borrowing from both free market and socialist system. India followed a neutral foreign policy and was amongst the leaders of the non-aligned movement. The country adopted a constitution and became a republic in 1950. The first general elections were held in 1951-52 with universal adult suffrage (above 21 years of age), making 173 million citizens eligible to vote from a total population of 361 million. The literacy rate for the country at that time was under 20%.

Business in the period between 1947-1991 was characterized by the co-existence of both Public Sector Units (PSU) and private. Banking remained predominantly under government control. Government owned Public Sector Units (PSU) were present in aviation, banking, engineering, oil & gas, telecom, etc. Above all, India remained a stable democracy.

In 1991, a new Industrial policy of liberalisation was announced, heralding a new era of Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation (LPG). Post liberalisation, India's growth trajectory has been consistent. Emerging as the fifth largest economy, moving towards the top 3 by 2030, there are emerging global organisations and business leaders. The Fortune 500 companies list for 2023 has eight Indian companies. In the Forbes Rich List 2023, there are six Indians, among the top 100.

This study: From muckraking to metaverse.....

In its history of over 100 years, public relations adopted to the changing needs of society, adjusting in conflicts and crises. Public relations education kept pace with the changing needs. Public relations education began in the 1920 at the University of Illinois (called publicity course), followed by a publicity course in 1922 at Indiana University. In 1923, Edward Bernays taught a one-semester course on public relations at New York University. The first degree programme was initiated at Boston University in 1947. Bodies like Commission for Public Relations Education (CPRE) in US, and others worked to identify the needs and asks in curriculum design beginning in the 1970's.

'From Muckraking to Metaverse: 100 years of Public Relations education – learning for India' aims to understand the key developments of last 100 years that impacted public relations education. Based on the understanding, the study aims to frame learning areas that helps practitioners align to dealing with the emerging scenario for the country.

Taking a qualitative, in-depth interview method, practitioners, academicians, industry observers (editors/ writers) and PR association leaders were interviewed.

Four institutes of importance for PR education were identified during the study, namely:

1. Xavier Institute of Communications (XIC), Mumbai
2. Indian Institute of Mass Communications (IIMC), New Delhi
3. Symbiosis Institute, Pune
4. Christ University, Bengaluru



During the study, academicians identified three associations who provide support for learning sessions and curriculum inputs. The three prominent public relations associations in India recalled are 1) Public Relations Society of India (PRSI) 2) Public Relations Consultants Association of India (PRCAI) and 3) Public Relations Council of India (PRCI).

PRSI was formed in 1958, and adopted the Athens code of conduct in 1968. In 2001, PR consultancies came together under the umbrella of PRCAI. Today, the association includes 100+ member firms and is associated with International Communications Consultancies Organisation (ICCO). PRCI was founded in 2004 with the aim of enriching professional development and networking. It maintains a pool of Guest Faculty to visit educational institutes for conducting PR sessions.

On the PR industry front, the SPRINT (Study of Public Relations Insights, Nuggets and Trends 2022-23) report by Public Relations Consultants Association of India (PRCAI), pegs the current public relations consulting business in India at USD 260 million; about 1% of the global industry (USD 20 billion). The top 5 industries contributing to consultancies' revenues are Information Technology, start-ups, financial services, health & wellness and pharmaceuticals².

The Indian economy as the 3rd largest globally, and a whole new workforce and leadership, by 2030 – the 40th year from liberalization – brings opportunity for the public relations sector to set a new course and fresh learning for the global PR fraternity. This study is an attempt to align and bring orientation amongst the stakeholders of public relations sector to prepare for the upcoming changes. Culture, Analytics, Technologies for Communications, Human influence/ relationships are the areas of focus for PR education, indicates this study.

²PRCAI: SPRINT Report, 2023



From the Literature

Public Relations in India

At the turn of the millennium, a study on the public relations industry in India, estimated the industry to be worth Rs 500 crore and employing over one lakh practitioners across sectors – private, not-for-profit and government (Bardhan & Sriramesh, 2004). According to the SPRINT 2023 report by Public Relations Consultants Association of India (PRCAI), public relations is estimated to be a Rs 2100 crore (USD 260 mn) industry, one percent of the global PR industry of USD 20 billion (PRCAI, SPRINT, 2023).

A systematic literature review of published literature on Indian public relations by Sanjaya Sahoo and Suresh Nayak identified 95 articles, of which 27 (twenty-three journal and four book articles) were chosen for their analysis. Their research indicates that systematic research on public relations in India is a post 1990 phenomenon. Among the articles under analysis, it was academicians who were based outside of India who contributed more literature on public relations in India (44% from US), while research from within India is about 22%. Though in the last decades academic literature has increased, the researchers believe that 'PR in India is a less researched subject'. The highest number of articles – eight - were published by US based academician Krishnamurthy Sriramesh (Sahoo & Nayak, 2022).

Krishnamurthy Sriramesh (PhD), articulates four stages of evolution of public relations in India: pre and during World War II, India's independence and post 1950's, which he terms as 'age of professionalism'. According to his research, government through Indian Railways and Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, pioneered the utilisation of public relations in India. In the private sector, TATA (an Indian conglomerate) was the first to establish a public relations department (Sriramesh, 2000).

Educator and author, Jaishri Jethwaney (PhD), former PR programme head at Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), highlights the establishment of Public Relations departments, headed by a professional, in all central Public Sector Units (PSU) in the 1970's, that laid the foundation of public relations in the country. Employee communications and highlighting government achievements were the two key roles. While protocol and media relations hitherto were the dominant role for private sector public relations in India, the liberalisation reforms and the opening of the Indian economy in the 1990's, attracted multinational companies to India: they brought the public relations culture with them (Jethwaney, 2010).



Business historian Dwijendra Tripathi, indicates that at the start of the first five-year plan in 1951, there were five public sector undertakings. By 1985, the number had increased to about 200. The addition of about 131 such companies after 1969 is an important phase for Indian economy. In 1969, some policy decisions impacted the private businesses immensely. Business groups with assets over Rs 200 crore needed clearance from Monopolies Restrictive Trade Policies (MRTP) commission for undertaking expansion. The same year, fourteen major banks were nationalized, which were managed by business groups, restricting the control of big business over the financial sector. During the first forty years of freedom (1947-1990), Indian business had to deal with policies that are referred as the 'licence permit raj' (Tripathi, 2004).

Genesis and growth of public relations practice – global experience

Throughout history, efforts towards “persuasion and public opinion” have existed. But it was in the twentieth century, that public relations emerged as a management function in the United States of America (Seitel, 2004). The underlying factors of the socio-political-economic system of democracy, free market economy, and an ‘educated and aspirational’ population accustomed to ‘freedom’, were present in twentieth century America (Baskin, Aronoff, & Lattimore, 1997).

The evolution of public relations happened in the ‘context of crises of power, conflicts and change’...Public relations became important owing to the threats emanating from the changes in the socio-economic environment...Edward Bernays, one of the first to write a book on public relations, identified four stages of modern public relations evolution: ‘public be damned era’ – ‘public be informed era’ – ‘mutual understanding era’ – ‘mutual adjustment era’ (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006)

The twentieth century began with the streak of activism through investigative journalists - the muckrakers – digging out ‘scandals associated with power capitalism and government corruption’. Joseph Pulitzer, was one such ‘muckraker’. His slogan ‘the public be informed’, contrasted the ‘public be damned’ attitude of the businesses of the era. It is not surprising that the first generation of public relations practitioners or press agents as they were called, were former journalists (Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2001) (Seitel, 2004).

There was a re-emergence of the ‘muckraking era’ in the decades of 1960 and 1970 in the USA. Heightened activism – the civil rights movement, consumer movements, anti-war protests, environment concerns – made organizations realise the need for a change in approach, facilitating the move from ‘mutual understanding’ towards ‘mutual adjustment’ and the opening of two-way communication (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006) (Baskin, Aronoff, & Lattimore, 1997).

The perspective of two-way symmetrical models of communication – focusing on maintaining and enhancing ‘relationships with publics’ – is that dialogue is important for relationship building (Heath & O’Hair, 2009). For practicing symmetrical public relations, four theories are important to be understood by the manager, whose focus is on ‘long term relationship building. The four theories are i) ‘Systems Theory’ ii) ‘Co-orientation Theory’ iii) ‘Situational Theory of Strategic Constituencies’ and iv) ‘Excellence Theory’ (Austin & Bruce, 2006).



Public relations received a fillip with practitioners making their presence felt through unique actions. Ivy Lee, a former journalist, established among the first public relations consultancies in 1904 in New York and issued a 'Declaration of Principles' to the city's editors explaining his business. Edward Bernays (a member of the Creel Committee formed in US during World War I to mobilise public opinion) called himself a 'public relations counsel'; authored a book 'Crystallizing Public Opinion'; and taught a course on PR at New York University in 1923. Arthur W Page, vice-president of public relations at AT&T in 1920's, known for his six principles of public relations insisted that 'PR is built by performance, not by publicity' (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006).

The Excellence Study (1984), supported by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), was a landmark study on the practice of public relations. One of the critiques of the Excellence Study (1984), was that the sample companies under the study were based in US, UK and Canada – countries with Anglo-Saxon cultures. In order to make the theory globally relevant, researchers studied the public relations practices in other countries. The ensuing study identified six variables – **'culture, political system, economic system, level of economic development, level of activism, and media'** – that impacts the utilisation of the two-way symmetrical approach in a country. As part of the study, Krishnamurthy Sriramesh highlighted the usage of Personal Influence model in public relations practice in India (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995).

For practitioner-author Fraser Seitel, five factors contributed to the growth of public relations: i) emergence of 'large institutions and their realisation of 'responsibility towards the public' ii) the heightened 'changes, conflicts and confrontations' amongst groups with varying interests iii) communication technology increased public awareness on developments iv) public opinion becoming paramount v) the emergence of world wide web and internet (Seitel, 2004).

Cultural awareness became important post 1990's, as technology connected the world, and brought a realisation for the need for communication, both domestic and international (Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2001). Post 1980's, the "digital age" and "globalisation" drove the growth of international public relations (Seitel, 2004). Communication and culture affect each other, they are like the 'two sides of a coin' (Dhanesha & Sriramesh, 2017).

In countries that adopted 'free market' system, moving from the 'communist influence' in the 1990's, public relations played a 'pedagogical role' in the 'transition period'. In the new political-economic environment, offering perspective about 'social order', 'worldview', 'culture and values', was important to gain public understanding (Tempere, 2006). Beyond the Eastern European countries, the term 'economies in transition', fits India as well. This transition from a managed economy to market-oriented, augurs change to the practice of public relations: the dominance of public relations of the public sector is replaced by private sector, bringing in more sophistication (Bardhan & Sriramesh, 2004).

Observing the genesis of public relations, it is not surprising that public relations education is dominated by writings and literature predominantly coming from the US. In European as well as Asian countries, the learning is based on US literature without contextualizing it to the local environment. To a large extent, there is lack of 'empirical studies' from countries other than US (Sriramesh, 2002).



The drive towards professionalism

There is general agreement amongst PR practitioners and academicians on the link between public relations education and professionalism. In the pursuit of professionalisation, the dominant opinion of public relations stakeholders - practitioners and academicians – is the need for ‘education’ and ‘standard curriculum’ (Hornaman & Sriramesh, 2006). Boston University was the first institute to offer a Master of Science – the first public relations degree at any level – in 1947 (Capizzo, Vasquez, & Jun, 2022).

The role of public relations practitioners is to interpret the public opinion climate to the management. It has an obligation to counsel the management on policies and actions that are in the interest of both the organization and public (Baskin, Aronoff, & Lattimore, 1997). Practitioners of public relations are not just ‘problem finders and solvers’, but ‘problem preventers’ as well (Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2001). Scholars like Pratt & Rentner (1989) believe that ‘**high ethical standards**’ contribute ‘to the professionalization of the occupation’. The other subject highlighted by scholars, to bring ‘respectability’ to the field of public relations is ‘**research**’, and needs to be focused in the education (Hornaman & Sriramesh, 2006).

The 2012 CPRE report ‘Standards for a Master’s Degree in Public Relations: Educating for Complexity’, advises five content pillars for the master’s degree curriculum namely, strategic public relations management; business principles and processes; theory and research methods for communication/public relations; global developments/trends and impact on the practice of public relations and ethics (Capizzo, Vasquez, & Jun, 2022). The recommendations for curriculum for public relations education includes ‘liberal arts’, ‘management’, ‘research’, ‘ethics’, ‘theory’, ‘writing’ and ‘technology’. Motivating students to focus on a specialization and undertaking internship were other recommendations (Hornaman & Sriramesh, 2006).



Interview: Krishnamurthy Sriramesh

In a globalized world, cross cultural sensitivity is more important than ever



Krishnamurthy Sriramesh is Professor of Public Relations at the University of Colorado. Amongst his many laurels, is that he was first to propose the 'Personal Influence' model of public relations practice.

His rich teaching profile includes teaching a range of courses in 10 universities in the North America, Asia, Australasia, and Europe while also delivering seminars/talks in over 40 countries. He is recognized for his scholarship on global public relations, culture and public relations, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and public relations for development. His program of research has resulted in 8 edited or co-edited books, over 120 articles and book chapters, and over 120 conference papers and other presentations around the world.

He has served as Assistant Editor of Public Relations Review (2004 – 2013), Associate Editor of Journal of Communication Management (2002 – 2016), and is currently a member of the editorial boards of a number of journals including Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, Management Communication Quarterly, and Public Relations Review

Excerpts from an interaction

Role of public relations in society

As a practice, public relations has several roles in society. It can be the glue that holds a society together but also one that can tear a society apart. Public relations campaigns have been used to build societies and even nations, but many campaigns have unfortunately also had detrimental effects on society. Therefore, it is very important for public relations practitioners to be morally grounded. For this to happen, ethics needs to be an integral part of public relations education and professional associations also have an important role to play in sustaining that moral compass. A profession needs a body of knowledge, ethics (code of conduct) and self-monitoring of the profession by its associations.

Traditionally, the field of public relations has focused almost exclusively on corporations ignoring communication by governments, civil society and not-for-profit PR. In India, the Press Information Bureau (PIB) and the public relations departments in government managed Public Sector Units (PSU) are good examples of government PR in practice.



Public relations education – the path for India

In a country with 22 official languages and great cultural diversity, public relations education should train students to adapt (to local culture) rather than adopt (Western concepts and models blindly). This can happen effectively only when there are greater numbers of empirical studies coming from India. Currently, there are very few empirical studies from India focusing on the relationship between Indian culture and traditions and communication. My three books have offered five socio-cultural variables – political culture, economic system, media system, societal culture, and activism as key variable impacting public relations practice.

The two key stakeholders – academia and associations – need to align more

From a US perspective, public relations associations have played a role in curriculum development providing support such as the educators' academy of the PRSA. But there is always a need and scope for greater collaboration. Unfortunately, there is still a wide chasm between practitioners and scholars.

Democracy, free markets, and public relations

A report by Freedom House called the 20th century as Democracy's century. At the beginning of the century, not a single country qualified as fully democratic state with 100% adult suffrage. By 1999, 113 countries had some form of democracy including some liberal democracies. Public Relations also gained prominence in the 20th century parallel with the growth of democracy. Non-Government Organisations/ civil society also grew in strength. The growth of public opinion also resulted in governments and businesses becoming more responsive to their stakeholders. In India, public relations as a function has been thriving in the public sector units and CSR has been an integral part of corporate practices. Tata Steel, for example, had adopted CSR activities in the 19th century itself, even before the concept became a buzzword in the latter part of the 20th century.

Technology and PR

With AI and immersive technologies, the impact on public relations practice is obvious but underexplored. A basic understanding of how technology works is warranted bearing in mind that technology is a tool that is evolving daily. So public relations practitioners will always be playing 'catch-up' to the demands of technology.

Teacher and curriculum: both are important

It is not a dichotomy, both are important. A good curriculum without effective teachers, and vice-versa, leaves a lot to be desired. Public relations is a practical subject, the curriculum has to balance both theory and practice. Likewise a research background for the teacher is important. A curriculum provides guidelines of what is to be taught, a good teacher makes it relevant to the context.




Research Methodology

This study followed a three-tier approach

1. The reports by Commission for Public Relations Education (CPRE) were referred to, to understand recommendations made about public relations education and curriculum. The works of academicians, who were part of CPRE reports in the past, were studied. Through a literature review of predominantly their works, seven themes related to the 100 years journey of PR education were identified.
2. To get an India context, since the subject required a deeper understanding, a qualitative approach was adopted, wherein in-depth interviews were conducted with the stakeholders of public relations sector in India, including academicians, practitioner leaders/association leaders, and industry observers/editors, totaling 20. Convenience and snow-ball methods of sampling were utilized and a thematic analysis of responses were gathered.
 - The study focused on three cities – Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru – the three key PR markets in India
 - The practitioner/association leader respondents have 20+ years work experience and had grown through the ranks to become leaders/founders/directors
3. There were four institutes identified by the non-academia respondents viz. practitioners, association leaders and the industry observers. All the four institutes offer post graduate level PR programmes. The curriculum and course structure of these institutes was analysed. Except Symbiosis (Pune), the other three institutes were based in Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru.

Note: The researcher got an impression that most of the non-academia respondents were engaged with the PR institutes as faculty, or advisors or on the board of studies of the PR institutes for the PR programmes.

The research questions

1. What are the asks and expectations of the Indian PR sector from the talent joining the public relations profession?
 2. What are the aims and objectives of the public relations syllabus - intended outcome for students studying public relations – in the top institutes offering post-graduate programmes in public relations?
 3. What subjects are being taught as syllabus in the institutes offering public relations courses in India at post-graduate level?
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Research Findings

Through the literature review, seven themes related to public relations education were identified. These themes formed the discussion points for the in-depth interviews with the public relations' stakeholders – practitioners, academicians, association leaders, and industry observers (editors).

- 1. Push towards professionalism:** The impetus for Public Relations education is linked to the orientation towards making public relations into a profession. How has been the experience for India?
- 2. PR stakeholders' alignment for stepping up:** Globally, associations of Public Relations/ Communications professionals played a catalyst role in advising on curriculum design. What are the actions for industry-academia collaboration in India?
- 3. PR education to prepare for a boundary spanning role:** The course curriculum proposed for public relations is a mix of communication and media theories, social sciences, research capabilities, business understanding, strategic thinking, and tactical actions. Is the curriculum at Indian PR institutes preparing students for the future?
- 4. PR not mere practice, but pedagogy:** Business history and government policies drove the role and growth of public relations. Post 1990's, public relations played a pedagogical role in the societies in transition from controlled to free market. What role has PR played in this alignment in India?
- 5. Focus on ethics:** The study and understanding of 'ethics' is an important part of public relations curriculum and professional standards for associations. Is 'ethics' a focus area in the curriculum in India?
- 6. Technology as a catalyst for growth, and enabler for work:** Technology changed the way public relations is practiced. For the Metaverse world, is the curriculum preparing students for strategic transformation role with digital as a medium?
- 7. Documenting, developing body of knowledge and inspiration:** Ivy Lee – Journalist turned public relations adviser brought an orientation towards publics' right to know: Issued a transparency statement describing his firm's work. Edward Bernays – a social scientist, writer, teacher, public relations practitioner: wrote amongst the first books on public relations and taught a course. Arthur W Page – a corporate communications professional, proposed the six principles of public relations practice. Theoretical frameworks were developed, due to the work of academicians. Is a body of knowledge for PR being developed in India?



To identify the leading PR institutes in the country, non-academic respondents – practitioners, association leaders, industry observers - were asked name their top of the mind recall (non-aided recall). Four institutes were identified by the respondents, as below. The course structure and curriculum of these institutes was analysed. All the institutes mentioned here were named by more than two non-academia respondents. There were other institutes named singly by a particular respondent, which are not included in the list

Institute	Course title	Duration	City
Xavier Institute of Communications (XIC)	Public Relations & Corporate Communication	10 months	Mumbai
Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC)	Post Graduate Diploma Course in Advertising and Public Relations	1 year	Delhi
Symbiosis Institute of Media & Communication	MBA – Communication Management	2 year	Pune
Christ University	Master of Arts Media and Communication Studies	2 year	Bengaluru

Note: In Indian education system, graduation in humanities and sciences generally follows 12 + 3 (graduation) + 2 (master) pattern

- Except IIMC, the other three are private institutes
- The course curriculum at these institutes is designed, benchmarked to offerings at foreign universities
- Being private institutes, offers them flexibility in curriculum update and inviting external faculty as guest lecturers
- Government aided universities do offer master's level programmes in public relations, but were not recalled in the study. These master's programmes help students to qualify for Ph.D and appear for exams like NET (National Eligibility Test), essential for applying for teaching posts at University level
- While updating the curriculum, inputs and feedback is sought from industry. Practitioners and association leaders are on the board of studies, or closely associated with the institutes as guest faculty
- There is active participation of practitioners as 'guest faculty' at the institutes. The idea of 'Professor of Practice' proposed by the government is expected to be a boon for the industry
- Research and Ethics is a focus subject at the institutes: depth, standard topics and intensity (course credits) differ



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- To ensure quality, and keep its PR programme relevant to current times, XIC follows a practice. The institute attracts a lot of guest faculty. A point of advice to all faculty at the institute: examples, developments discussed in class need to be current and contextual. A student in the class is designated as 'academic assistant', who notes the points and cases discussed by faculty in the class
 - Teachers are more important than the curriculum, or equally important, is the overwhelming belief across the respondents

Industry-academia collaboration

- The engagement between academia and PR associations is limited to organising events and activities. Both sides agree there is lack of consistent engagement and a vision for the development of PR practice, and how education institutes can play a role in it
- Academicians feel that industry should take more interest in curriculum design, as the students ultimately join there after the course
- According to an academician, PR consultancies – the major recruiters and guest faculty source – themselves lack a cohesive and unanimous view of what PR is or what it does
- Adopting a case study method like B-schools is important in a practical field like public relations – suggests an Indian CEO. For developing Indian case studies, it is important for practitioners to share information, which is not happening, rues academicians

Both stakeholders agree that there should be more collaboration. The challenge appears to be: who will take the first step?

Efforts by PR associations

The three PR associations identified by academia and practitioners working towards the betterment of the practice are PRSI, PRCI and PRCAI. Associations are engaged with academia, albeit in an event-based manner: strategic engagement is work in progress.

PRSI (1958): During COVID, PRSI organised a 15-day free online workshop for students across India, addressed by practitioners, with the aim of building orientation towards public relations. The association actively organizes events for students, along with the academic institutes. For researchers completing a PhD in public relations, the association offers a cash reward. To motivate teachers, it confers a 'Best teacher' award. The PRSI adopted the Athens code in 1968.

PRCAI (2001): Over 100+ PR firms are members of the association. Their latest report SPRINT 2023, highlights the state of public relations in India. The association initiated the Accreditation in PR (AIPR) certification, with the aim of enhancing the level of knowledge, skills, and professional calibre among the professionals.



PRCI (2004): The council is working on a uniform 'accreditation model', and looking to get support from all stakeholders for its implementation. It brings out various magazines – Chanakya, Kautilya, Aadhvika – targeted at different segments of PR practitioners and has a book of ethics. The Young Communicators Club, the student wing, started in 2013 by PRCI today has presence in 86 colleges and 23 universities across the country. The council maintains a 'pool of faculty' to teach at PR institutes.

An eminent Delhi based PR academician recalls the setting up of a PR Education foundation, decades back, by one of the PR associations. It was a welcome move as it started creating some body of knowledge, documenting indigenous PR case studies. But for some unknown reasons, that initiative was not pursued. She believes some progress has been made, but much is desired on the alignment between academia, associations and professionals in India. It has a long way to go.

Some important viewpoints from the interviews

"The winds of change are apparent. Indian managers are traveling around the globe. Businesses today look at public relations with more respect", opines a senior PR professional based in Bengaluru.

"Post liberalization, the practice of public relations witnessed a transition from personal relations oriented public relations to more strategic work: from 'know who' to 'know how', observes the CEO of a research driven PR firm, based in Delhi.

"We will be happy to align with the PR industry to bring reports on and for the sector", said the programme head for public relations at a premier institute in Delhi.

"Institutes should aim for providing global exposure to Indian PR students, like internships in foreign PR firms or collaborating with global PR associations/ institutes for student exchange programmes", suggests the former PR head of India's leading cancer hospital based in Mumbai.

"Students are never bad; faculty makes the difference. Best qualification does not necessarily mean good teacher", feels a Delhi based teacher involved in designing curriculum across many institutes and counts many who's who of the PR industry as his students.

"Attitude of constant learning is important; skills can be taught. Business understanding is most important, not just communications. Practitioners should not be content doing tactical actions, but be aware of the macro picture, and generally business and economic developments – these are subjects that business leaders value", emphasises the India CEO of a global PR firm.

"Culture understanding is important from an Indian PR context. What motivates a person in Chennai, is different from Delhi", believes the leader of an Indian PR firm, a Chartered Accountant by qualification.

"We need more empirical research coming from India, which will reduce ethnocentricities in the current public relations education. A globalised world calls for cross-cultural learning, hence cultural understanding at corporate and societal level, needs to be a focus area. Adapt, not adopt, the global curriculum for public relations education in India", suggests US based academician, with extensive writings on public relations in India.



Responses on key points

On technology

Academicians believe that PR practitioner cannot be a knower of all. Technology is developing fast, and one has to keep pace with it. The expertise of practitioners is communications, they should focus on that, but should know the basic modalities of operation – machine learning, algorithms – not coding per se. This is important from the perspective of dealing with fake news, misinformation and disinformation. All concur that education and even current PR practitioners have to evolve to dealing with the situations.

According to one industry observer (editor), who is involved in curriculum discussions at a PR institute: “Digital is taught as a separate course under Digital learning programmes or under advertising. Need more emphasis on integrating digital in PR education programmes.”

For the practitioners, PR people having to level up on technology, is a constant and dominant view.

“Digital economy is naked economy – all information is freely available on the internet. AR/ VR will further accentuate user experience, and at the same time pose challenges like deep fake. Technology is forcing PR not to remain tactical”, said the CEO of a research driven PR firm, based in Delhi.

The Mumbai based, India CEO of a global PR has a suggestion to fast track digital adoption in PR: “Make the next generation, the 12-15 year experienced practitioners, responsible for technology transformation at PR firms. They are a digital native generation. Seniors of today can take a back seat. Practitioners should envisage how ‘activism’ will look like in the Metaverse world”.

On academicians being asked about media monitoring, which is tech enabled today and run by professional, independent companies, whether those companies provide hands-on training to PR students at the institutes, the answer was ‘no’. One of the major tasks that new joiners in the PR practice do is ‘environment scanning’, where media monitoring and analysis is an important part of their daily tasks.

Two larger questions remain, which can be a topic of separate study: Is the PR practitioner truly the custodian of online reputation? Is the PR practitioner equipped to deal with emerging technology changes?

On lack of documentation and developing a body of knowledge

Across all respondents’, a lack of documentation and development of body of knowledge based on local learning was a common rue. It is considered a culture issue, missing in education across sectors and not restricted only to PR. Closely linked to this, is the idea that the young generation should know the movers and shakers of PR sector in India for motivation purposes.

All non-academia respondents feel public relations has evolved over the years, and is getting recognition. More strategic orientation is required to gain more acceptance.



On course curriculum and expected asks for the PR practitioner

Practitioners believe that understanding how human influence and relationships are undergoing change in the new technology driven world is critical. PR is not just communications, the practitioner should understand the business environment and the larger macro picture. This is linked to what PR literature indicates: the role of PR is to interpret the public opinion to the organisation's leadership.

Efforts towards talent grooming have precedents in India. In early 2000's itself, one Indian PR firm (which eventually became part of a global group) initiated a talent management programme to create a cadre of PR practitioners. Some prominent PR leaders of today have at some point in time worked with the firm.

On education and professionalisation

Respondents, including academia, hinted at other related professions like journalism, advertising, marketing, who focus on their work, and are not stuck to debates on whether theirs is a profession.

Respondents believe PR in India is too dependent on English; there is a need to focus on PR in regional languages. For context: there is only one English newspaper in the top 10 daily newspaper readership as per Indian Readership Survey.

Practitioners believe that PR is a practical field and education background is good, although not critical. This view aligns with researchers Hornaman and Sriramesh's who found that though there is realisation that public relations education is important for the practitioners, a formal qualification is not an essential criterion to 'excel' as a public relations practitioner (Hornaman & Sriramesh, 2006).

On ethics

Most respondents believed that 'ethics' are related to culture, and Indian stakeholders should look at developing ethic codes based on local sensibilities. A practitioner leader opined that the tradition of multi-generation families in India helps transferring values from generation to generation, and is a strength. Ethics are ingrained, how one is brought up, what values are imbibed; it can not be given like an injection, he believes.

Describing India in his book *Breakout Nations*, author Ruchir Sharma, writes that it is a high context society, a term popularized by Anthropologist Edward Hall. Such societies are traditional and family oriented, valuing and maintaining long relationships. A lot goes unsaid, and has to be understood from context (Sharma, 2012).

The need for an indigenously developed body of knowledge was expressed by all respondents.



Research questions & findings

1. What are the asks and expectations of the Indian PR sector from the talent joining the public relations profession?

A. Beyond communication and media, PR curriculum should focus on:

- **Culture** – given the complexity and variation within India; and also global exposure
- **Analytics** – research and data in the technology driven world is a necessity now
- **Technologies for communications** – the PR practitioner can not be a knower of all subjects. His/her area of expertise will remain communications. But in the evolving technology scenario, where risk dynamics are changing, the practitioner needs to work with technology experts to deal with situations like fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, for which technology understanding is key to be able to guide the tech experts
- **Humanities** – an understanding of changing paradigms of ‘influence’ and ‘relationships’, the key areas of focus of public relations practice, need to be understood; the practitioners knowledge of psychology, sociology, is important

2. What are the aims and objectives of the public relations syllabus - intended outcome for students studying public relations – at the top institutes offering post-graduate programmes in public relations?

A. Four institutes were identified by the non-academia respondents. The two top PR institutes identified offer 1 year courses. Three of the institutes are private; one run under the aegis of the government offers a one year programme. Among the institutes identified in this study, the orientation is towards providing good practitioners to the industry. There are public universities that offer Master level programmes, but were not recalled by the respondents

3. What subjects are being taught as syllabus in the institutes offering public relations courses in India at post-graduate level?

A. The curriculum is benchmarked against international institutes, incorporating feedback from practitioners



Conclusion

Many leaders in Public Relations today, will recall the 'fax machine' in their office. The beeping sound of this machine started your day. Not long ago, this humble machine, was a sought-after device for PR practitioners every morning, especially the day after you had a major announcement. You along with the team ensured reaching the office early to lay claim on the machine and send updates.

Today, the PR pro can monitor from anywhere and send 'environment scan' updates on e-mail from any location. The update includes news monitoring and social media conversations tracking. The Cluetrain Manifesto also made the startling revelation: a young executive and the senior most person in the team are equals in information – they have same access to information, thanks to the internet.

This new age, the internet is also bringing new challenges – the uppermost on PR practitioners mind is misinformation and disinformation. Whether AI is a threat or opportunity is no debate now; we have to learn to live with AI (more details in CIPR report: Humans Needed More Than Ever).

Clearly, respondents in this study identified Culture, Analytics, Technologies impacting Communication, Humanities (understanding changing nature of relationships/influence) as the areas of focus for PR education in India.

Two industries that dominate our lives today – technology and healthcare – have a concept of ecosystem wherein talent, finances and innovators are in close proximity. Think Silicon Valley and Boston as the hubs. The three key stakeholders of PR – practitioners, academia and associations – need to think on the lines of creating an eco-system for growth and development of the practice. To bring more alignment between practitioners and academia, there is a need for continuous engagement. In the current study, respondents highlighted that the teacher is more important than syllabus. Teacher's orientation programmes, to discuss the developments, the emerging scenario, and its impact on PR, can be a starting point.

Recommendations for future studies

- A quantitative survey to make an estimate of the institutes offering post graduate level programmes of PR education in India
- A quantitative survey to make an estimate of practitioners of public relations in India employed across consultancies, in-house, government and not-for-profit
- A qualitative study to make recommendations on public relations curriculum, focusing on the emerging needs of stakeholders employing public relations practitioners



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